

TRUST GENERATES COMMUNITY VACCINE ACCEPTANCE

Communications and outreach from civil society organizations and local leaders in Vietnam

Son La Province in Vietnam, a mountainous area with harsh terrain and many ethnic minority communities with historical resistance to vaccination, is seeing positive changes in health behaviors. This change is driven by trusted local figures: Women's Union members, Youth Union volunteers, and village leaders who are equipped with new communication skills and knowledge to better support their communities.

“Vaccination messages alone are not attractive enough.”

Located in a remote highland area, residents of Ngoc Chien Commune face rugged terrain and harsh weather that make it difficult to access health care services, including immunization. Most of the commune's population belongs to the H'Mông ethnic group, where many children are still not fully vaccinated, largely due to limited health information and persistent misconceptions about vaccines.

Although Mrs. Leo Thi Dem had only recently become Vice Chair of the Women's Union in Ngoc Chien Commune, she quickly made an impact. Through keen observation, she realized that the community health communication sessions were largely ineffective. Caregivers were too busy, reluctant to travel long distances, and not particularly engaged in separate health talks—immunization was no exception.

Mrs. Dem decided to integrate immunization information into existing Women's Union meetings and thematic sessions as part of Project 8—a national program led by the Vietnam Women's Union that already drew strong participation and covered relevant topics such as gender equality, maternal health, and livelihoods for ethnic minority women.



Mrs. Dem during a group communication session.



Health checkups and medicine boost attendance at communication sessions.

At these sessions, Mrs. Dem added a short segment of about 30 minutes on immunization, incorporating an opportunity for questions and answers to boost interaction. She especially highlighted the importance of tetanus vaccination for pregnant women to prevent neonatal tetanus, as the commune lies within a high-risk region. Male caregivers were also invited to these sessions, which proved a key step in improving male participation in child care and ensuring both parents receive consistent health information.

At the meetings, health care workers strengthened communication by sharing relevant information about local epidemic situations and by providing practical services such as blood pressure checks and deworming medicine as additional health services for attendees.

One major challenge was the language barrier. Since Mrs. Dem was not fluent in H'Mông, she collaborated with a village Women's Union member and village leaders to interpret and encourage the community to bring their children for vaccinations.

In her first month, Mrs. Dem led seven communication sessions (five group sessions and two individual sessions), boosting antenatal checkups and tetanus shots and contributing to the overall increase in immunization coverage in Ngoc Chien.

Ms. Dem stresses that even with the best messages, communication is only effective when health facilities, community-based organizations, and local authorities work closely together. This collaboration strengthens community trust in the health system and provides caregivers with consistent and encouraging messages to help keep their children healthy.

Like Ms. Dem, Women's Union members elsewhere in Vietnam work to provide active support, highlighting their important role in connecting communities with the health system.



Women's Union cadres in Co Ma Commune engaging female and male caregivers. Men are typically the decision-makers in the H'Mông community; these sessions help promote gender equality and strengthen fathers' involvement in child care.

“We’re a young force. Wherever we’re needed, we’ll be there.”

The Youth Union in Son La Province is active, well-connected to young adults of childbearing age, and committed to improving youth and community health. However, most of their activities focus on outdoor volunteer work and social campaigns, which offer limited opportunities for in-depth health communication. Health communication is often limited to occasional Youth Union meetings, which occur infrequently and offer few consistent touchpoints with young adults of childbearing age.

Recognizing this gap, Mr. Lo Van Minh, Youth Union Secretary of Bon Phang Commune, adapted his approach to health communication. Rather than relying solely on traditional Youth Union events, he partnered with the commune health station to bring immunization messaging into existing community settings where young parents were already present, such as school activities, parent-teacher meetings, and village gatherings. The immunization flipbook, updated with support from PATH, became his trusted companion, delivering concise and accurate messages with easy-to-understand illustrations—especially about disease risks, vaccine benefits, and post-vaccination care. He used a question-and-answer approach and interactive games to engage young parents and create a trusted, friendly space to share information. Additionally, he regularly shared vaccine information through Zalo, a local messenger app, using the Youth Union group in the commune and the dedicated village groups



Ms. Dich, the Chairwoman of the Women's Union in Co Ma Commune, speaks with H'Mông community members during a communication session.

for pregnant women and mothers. These existing channels, already known by the community, were crucial for increasing access to clear, vivid information that reached everyone directly and helped maintain community trust.

As a result of this approach, community members—especially young parents—now better understand the importance, safety, and schedules of immunization and proactively take their children to vaccination appointments without needing follow-up reminders.

During immunization campaigns, such as the second measles vaccination campaign in April 2025, Youth Union members do more than raise awareness and mobilize parents to vaccinate their children. They also provide crucial logistical support, such as welcoming attendees, arranging seating, and escorting children to vaccination points—showcasing their proactive spirit, responsibility, and flexibility. Their efforts were a significant contribution to the success of the measles vaccination campaign in Son La, which achieved a 97% vaccination rate. Mr. Minh shared, “We are a young force. Wherever we are needed, we will be there and give it our all.”

“I visited every household.”

Phieng Phu is one of the most remote villages in Mai Son District, located 86 kilometers from the district health center. It is home to 11 Thai households and more than 100 H'Mông households. The H'Mông community, which faces challenges in understanding Kinh—the official language—has historically low vaccination coverage. This has been a long-standing concern for Mr. Vang A Nếnh, who has served as both village chief and Party Secretary for the past 22 years. At the start of PATH's work in the district, eight families had zero-dose or under-immunized children in Phieng Phu.

Initially, Mr. Nếnh believed vaccination outreach and mobilization were the sole responsibility of health workers. After attending the training on communication skills and multisectoral coordination in immunization co-organized by PATH, the National Institute of Hygiene and Epidemiology, Son La Center for Disease Control, and the Mai Son District Health Center, he better understood the potential influence of his leadership and the trust he held from the community. Mr. Nếnh partnered with the village health worker to organize village meetings to communicate about immunization. He soon realized that the families with zero-dose and under-immunized children never attended.



Mr. Nếnh visits each household to persuade parents to vaccinate their children. Photos by Son La Center for Disease Control.

He changed his approach. First, he leveraged the messages developed by PATH and project partners to broadcast simple messages on the village loudspeaker in H'Mông to raise awareness and spark curiosity. Then he took a more personal approach—visiting each household individually to listen to concerns and explain the benefits and safety of vaccines. Sometimes it took repeated visits to persuade them. In the end, all eight previously hesitant families vaccinated their children.

Mr. Nếnh's work is not finished, as there are still many families in the community who support vaccination but need repeated reminders before taking their children to get vaccinated. Mr. Nếnh plans to continue group communication activities, working closely with Youth and Women's Union representatives to integrate vaccination messages into community meetings and Union activities, aiming to further improve awareness in the village over time. He remains ready to visit any families who are misinformed about vaccination to ensure no child is left behind.

What we know now

Immunization information must reach every corner

In remote and hard-to-reach provinces like Son La, where health care resources can be sparse and communities are widespread, ensuring people have access to the immunization information they need is essential. The support of trusted local community organizations and leaders, such as Women's and Youth Unions and village leaders, becomes the bridge to reaching every household, empowering them with vital vaccine knowledge.

Communication connects

When initial communication efforts do not spur action, the key is not to give up, but to adapt and try a different approach. The most impactful communication happens when we meet communities where they are—whether it is a village chief knocking on every door, a Women's Union leader weaving messages into familiar gatherings, or youth volunteers showing up at community events. Once an introduction is made, the key is to help people feel seen, heard, and valued, and to engage in two-way communication to understand concerns, build trust, and provide tailored responses. This approach ensures that the right message reaches the right person in the right context and helps overcome barriers such as language and geography.

Elevate and strengthen trusted voices

Local leaders and civil society organizations such as the Women's Union and Youth Unions possess strong community trust. However, they often face challenges such as limited medical expertise and a shortage of communication methods and appropriate materials. Through extensive training programs focused on immunization knowledge, communication skills and materials, and intersectoral coordination, PATH and its partners empowered more than 450 health and community staff to confidently deliver immunization activities and provide cascade training to peers and lower-level personnel within the health system. With tailored activities, focused outreach, and technical assistance, local voices can become powerful agents of change to boost immunization in hard-to-reach areas.



Mr. Lo Van Minh, Youth Union Secretary of Bon Phang Commune, speaks with female caregivers.

The work of civil society organizations (CSOs) and other local partners can be most impactful when their role is clearly understood by immunization sector stakeholders. In Vietnam, PATH supported the introduction of the Intersectoral Coordination Regulation on Immunization Communication and Mobilization, signed by the Son La Department of Health and the People's Committees of the four project districts. This regulation represents a critical strategic step, making CSO engagement systematic, regulated, and widely implemented across the province. The memorandum of understanding helps to clarify the roles of CSOs and other partners, improving efficiencies from working together and helping sustain the collaboration among various entities in the future, even as staff change.

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