

Positive Action for Children Fund

Improving access to antenatal services in Lesotho

One of the Fund's 2010 grant recipients, Partners In Health (PIH), will use their funding to expand a promising pilot project in the mountains of Lesotho. The pilot, at PIH's Bobete clinic, was a response to the high local rates of HIV infection among women, the very low rates of access to clinical care and of attended births, and the high maternal mortality that resulted. Too many women were unaware of or unable to access the benefits of clinic-based antenatal care and relied on the tradition of lay attendants who support births at home.

PIH's response was a project that would bring more women into antenatal care – including vaccinations, vitamins, HIV testing and treatment, breastfeeding guidance and nutrition – using the existing networks of Traditional Birth Attendants (TBAs). TBAs have been trained to identify and refer pregnant women to clinic-based services. They receive a financial incentive that compensates them for any loss of earnings from attending home births and rewards their new outreach role.



The early results have been impressive: births at the clinic have risen dramatically (rising six-fold on the previous year), and most of these (83%) were a result of TBA intervention; and 8% of women attending the antenatal clinic who did not already know their status have tested positive for HIV. The success of the project has been to translate this into real health benefits: earlier diagnosis, improved PMTCT and ante and post-natal care that impact on mother and child health.

In addition to developing TBAs and improving clinic-based services, PIH has responded to the other challenge of rural health care, the distance some women inevitably have to travel. Most women live too far from the clinics to safely access services once labour has started. PIH provides mothers' waiting houses adjacent to their clinics where women can stay when birth is imminent, usually for up to two weeks.

By the end of April 2011 Partners In Health hope to have applied this approach to all seven of their clinics in Lesotho. And by liaising with the Ministry of Health they hope to find ways to adapt the model for use nationally.