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TWICE-YEARLY MATERNAL AND CHILD HEALTH WEEKS
REDUCE CHILD MORTALITY IN SIERRA LEONE

November 29, 2011, Bo, Sierra Leone – Helen Keller International (HKI), Sierra Leone’s Ministry of Health and Sanitation (MoHS) and other distinguished partners launched the biannual Maternal and Child Health Week (MCHW), locally called “Mami en Pekin Weliwodi Week,” in Bo on November 24th. The MoHS has institutionalized these health weeks to promote high-impact and cost-effective maternal and child survival interventions. Since their inception, the MCHWs have been effective in reaching over 80% of the target population.

The most recent MCHW, November 25-29, 2011, provided vitamin A supplementation to about 1 million children 6-59 months, as well as mosquito nets and immunizations. Other interventions during this week included screening children 6-59 months for malnutrition, de-worming children 12-59 months with albendazole, and administering tetanus toxoid immunizations to women of child-bearing age in five districts (Koinadugu, Kailahun, Kenema, Bonthe and Moyamba).

Maternal and Child Health Weeks have been a major contributing factor in the post-war progress made by the Ministry of Health and Sanitation to reduce child mortality. Due in part to advocacy by HKI, the Ministry now actively promotes the Essential Nutrition Actions and many of them are offered during the MCHWs. These actions, which have been proven to reduce maternal and child under-nutrition and associated mortality and morbidity, include: encouraging exclusive breastfeeding, timely and appropriate introduction of complementary feeding, vitamin A supplementation, promoting infant feeding during and after illness, preventing anemia in children through de-worming, use of mosquito nets, timely and appropriate treatment of infections, promoting the use of iodized salt, as well as promoting women’s health and nutritional status while pregnant. Since 2005, under five mortality rates have declined rapidly: from 267/1,000 in 2005 to 140/1,000 in 2008 to 118/1,000 in 2010.

The launch in November showcased the Ministry’s strong commitment to promote mother and child health and created visibility and public awareness about the MCHWs to further mobilize public and partner support. The Hon. Haja Zainab Bangura, Sierra Leone’s Minister of Health and Sanitation, officially launched the event. Attendees included representatives from local councils, the World Health Organization, UNICEF, MSF, educational institutions, as well as community leaders and dignitaries.

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Founded in 1915, Helen Keller International’s (HKI) mission is to save the sight and lives of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged. HKI combats the causes and consequences of blindness and malnutrition by establishing programs based on evidence and research in vision, health and nutrition. The organization is known for sustainability, reliability, efficiency, and the highest level of technical expertise in preventing blindness and reducing malnutrition. HKI is headquartered in New York City, and has programs in 21 countries in Africa and Asia as well as in the United States, addressing malnutrition (including vitamin A deficiency), cataract, trachoma, onchocerciasis (river blindness) and refractive error. HKI receives support from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) and other national and local governments as well as from private and corporate foundations and individuals.