



## Lassa Fever Awareness Campaign: A Realistic Community Engagement Approach

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An old Kurdish proverb says, “A hungry stomach has no ears,” a saying that aptly captures the experiences of our volunteers in Delta State, Nigeria, as they engage community members on the deadly Lassa Fever disease.

One such experience involved Mr. Olayemi, a father of three and a tailor specializing in menswear, who resides in Asaba.



*Image 1: Mr. Olayemi in his shop.*

Cynthia and Naomi, two female Red Cross volunteers, were conducting house-to-house sensitization during an awareness exercise on Parkinson Street, near the banks of the River Niger, when they encountered Mr. Olayemi and his family at his shop. Although initially unfamiliar with Lassa Fever, Mr. Olayemi welcomed the volunteers and eagerly absorbed the information they shared. He was particularly appreciative of the posters containing key messages about the disease.

“I learned that there’s a specific type of rat responsible for Lassa Fever, a rat that has many breasts,” Mr. Olayemi recounted. “They explained that if this rat contaminates food in your house and you unknowingly consume it, it can cause Lassa Fever. Even when other species of rats urinate on our food or die in the house, it’s best to throw the food away. I’m very grateful to the Red Cross volunteers for this knowledge.”



*Image 2: Cynthia, a volunteer, sharing Lassa Fever messages with Mr. Olayemi.*

To ensure the message resonated, the volunteers asked Mr. Olayemi what he would do if a rat urinated or defecated in his food, given the current economic challenges. His candid response was both surprising and revealing.

"I won't lie," he said. "With the situation in the country and how expensive garri is, I'd find it hard to throw away a whole bowl if a rat urinated in it. But with the knowledge I've gained, I know I have to do what's right. When I first learned about the symptoms of Lassa Fever, I was scared. But do you know how expensive garri is now? Before, the fear of the cost would stop me from throwing it away. However, after what I've learned, I'm more afraid of Lassa Fever than the economy."

Mr. Olayemi, originally from Osun State, is not alone in facing the difficult decision between protecting his family's health and conserving food amidst soaring prices caused by inflation. Yet, his words have become a powerful tool for the Nigerian Red Cross Society (NRCS) volunteers, who are leveraging his testimony to drive behavior change across communities. They are encouraging community members to adopt healthier habits that could prevent such dilemmas from occurring in the first place.

"Since the Red Cross educated us about Lassa Fever, my family and I have made several changes," Mr. Olayemi shared. "We keep our environment and our house clean. We wash our dirty clothes immediately instead of storing them. We make sure everything is clean. We now protect our food by storing it in containers and keeping it covered."