

Community Nursing as a Strategic Accelerator of Sustainable Development Goals in Nigeria

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Abstract

Community nursing has become a critical strategy for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly in low and middle-income countries such as Nigeria, where workforce shortages, preventable diseases, and health inequalities remain significant public health concerns. This article examined the strategic role of community health nurses (CHNs) in achieving SDG-related outcomes through the delivery of primary health care services, including health promotion, disease prevention, maternal and child health services, environmental sanitation, chronic disease management, and community empowerment. Drawing from current literature and global health frameworks, the paper highlights how community health nurses contribute not only to SDG 3, which focuses on good health and well-being, but also to goals related to poverty reduction, gender equality, clean water and sanitation, quality education, and reduced inequalities. The article further explored Nigeria's structural health system challenges, including weak health information systems, inadequate staffing, and poor infrastructure, which constrain optimal community health nursing practice. It concluded that strengthening community health nursing through workforce investment, leadership development, digital health integration, policy support, and improved primary health care systems is essential for sustainable health development and accelerated SDG attainment in Nigeria. Therefore, more qualified community health nurses should be recruited, properly distributed, and retained through better welfare and supportive working conditions.

Keywords: Community nursing, sustainable development goals, primary health care.

Introduction

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), adopted in 2015 by the United Nations, established a universal call to end poverty, protect the planet, and safeguard prosperity for all by 2030 (United Nations, 2023). Though SDG 3 clearly focuses on health, nearly all 17 goals interconnect with health determinants and outcomes. In Nigeria and other low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), where avoidable maternal deaths, infectious diseases, malnutrition, and rising non-communicable diseases (NCDs) continue, achieving the SDGs depends intensely on robust, community-based primary health care (PHC) systems (World Health Organisation [WHO] & United Nations Children's Fund, [UNICEF], 2021). At the focus of this system is community nursing.

Population-focused disciplines like Community Health Nursing deliver preventive, promotive, and basic curative services at the grassroots, within homes and communities rather than hospital settings (Odetola & Adedokun, 2020). This brings together health systems and households, interpreting national and global health obligations into culturally grounded and practical interventions. Anchored in PHC principles and the social determinants of health context, community nursing reports upstream drivers of ill health, including poverty, education, sanitation, gender inequities, and environmental hazards (WHO, 2022).

Community Nursing and the SDG Nexus

Community nursing is one of the clearest ways the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) move from policy language to real-life impact. Its role in advancing SDG 3 is visible in everyday primary health care activities; routine immunisation, maternal and child health services, infectious disease control, non-communicable diseases screening, and expanding access to universal health coverage (WHO, 2023; WHO & UNICEF, 2021). In many rural communities, the community health nurse is the first professional and provides the most consistent health care received by the people, making early prevention and early intervention possible.

Beyond direct health outcomes, community nursing intersects with broader development goals. By providing affordable preventive services and linking families to social protection programmes, community nurses help reduce financial vulnerability, thereby supporting SDG 1 (United Nations [UN], 2023). Their roles in nutrition education, breastfeeding promotion, and growth monitoring help address malnutrition under SDG 2 (UNICEF, 2021), while school health programmes and health literacy initiatives strengthen the relationship between health and educational achievement under SDG 4 (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation [UNESCO], 2022). Community health nurses (CHNs) also contribute significantly to achieving SDG 3 by providing preventive, promotive, curative, rehabilitative, and supportive healthcare services that improve access to quality healthcare and reduce health inequalities within communities (Parry, 2022). Through medication monitoring, lifestyle counselling, psychosocial support, follow-up care, and other community-based interventions, CHNs improve patient adherence to treatment, reduce hospital admissions, and enhance the quality of life of individuals living with chronic illnesses (Saquing et al., 2025). They further contribute to reducing maternal and child mortality through antenatal care, postnatal care, newborn care, breastfeeding education, and immunisation services (Bhutta, 2017). In addition, CHNs support SDG 4 (Quality Education) by educating individuals and communities on healthy lifestyles, hygiene, nutrition, disease prevention, and self-care practices, while their roles in women's empowerment, reproductive health advocacy, and employment opportunities contribute to SDG 5 (Gender Equality) (Parry, 2022). Their promotion of safe water, sanitation, infection prevention, and proper waste management further supports SDG 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation) (Taminato et al., 2023).

Furthermore, CHNs advocate for vulnerable and marginalised populations, including rural dwellers, women, children, older adults, and persons living with disabilities, thereby helping to reduce inequalities and promote social justice in healthcare delivery. During pandemics and public health emergencies such as COVID-19, community health nurses play significant roles in community surveillance, vaccination campaigns, infection prevention, psychosocial support, and continuity of healthcare services (Parry, 2022). Through policy advocacy, interprofessional collaboration, leadership, community mobilisation, and health system strengthening, CHNs continue to contribute immensely toward achieving universal health coverage and advancing the broader global health agenda (World Health Organisation [WHO], 2017). In practice, community health nursing integrates global development goals into routine healthcare activities at the community level.

Nigeria's Structural Constraints and Pathways for SDG Acceleration

Nigeria's progress toward the health-related Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) continues to be constrained by deep-rooted structural weaknesses within its health system. National data still reflect high maternal mortality, persistent child malnutrition, and ongoing infectious disease burdens, underscoring uneven advancement toward global targets (National Population Commission [NPC] & ICF, 2021). A major bottleneck is the critical shortage of skilled health personnel. A Workload Indicators of Staffing Need (WISN) assessment in Cross River State showed that only about 40 per cent of the required nurses and midwives were available in primary health care (PHC) facilities, a deficit that directly compromises service delivery and patient safety (Okoroafor et al., 2021). In many rural areas, limited staffing is further aggravated by weak infrastructure and inconsistent essential medicine supply, widening inequities in access and quality (Uzomba et al., 2021). Beyond workforce gaps, fragile health information systems, characterised by under-reporting and incomplete routine data, limit accurate performance monitoring and evidence-based planning (Bhattacharya et al., 2019; Tchoualeu et al., 2021). These systemic deficiencies,

compounded by sociocultural barriers and unclear professional role boundaries within PHC structures, restrict the full deployment of community nursing expertise (Onasoga et al., 2021).

Despite all these challenges, many interventions are still possible. So, according to WHO and UNICEF (2021), strengthening these primary health care models that are led by nurses has been assumed to have made access better. It has also increased the quality of service and reduced cost, particularly in some communities that are not well served. However, at the same time, investing in digital health, leadership development, and the ability to retain the workforce is important to build a more resilient and responsive health system. This growing global climate, resilient health system and locally generated operational research show that there is a need for the strategic role of the community health nurse as the person at the front line to carry out the sustainable development goal-focused interventions (WHO, 2021; United Nations, 2023).

Conclusion

Community nursing remains a vital and sustainable strategy for accelerating the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Nigeria. Community health nurses play important roles in health promotion, disease prevention, maternal and child health, chronic disease management, and advocacy for vulnerable populations. Despite challenges such as inadequate staffing, poor infrastructure, and weak health systems, community nursing continues to improve healthcare access, reduce inequalities, and strengthen primary health care delivery. Strengthening community nursing through policy support, workforce investment, and improved health systems is essential for achieving universal health coverage and sustainable national development.

Recommendations

1. The government should increase investment in primary health care and community nursing services, especially in rural areas.
2. More qualified community health nurses should be recruited, properly distributed, and retained through better welfare and supportive working conditions.
3. Health information systems should be improved to support effective planning, monitoring, and evaluation of community health services.
4. Policymakers should strengthen the leadership and professional roles of community health nurses within the healthcare system.
5. More community-based research and interprofessional collaboration should be encouraged to improve healthcare delivery and SDG achievement in Nigeria.

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