James Waninga moves busily across the open veranda of the Bushika Health Center III, a basic structure beside a red dirt road in the village of Busanza, Uganda. It is an easy building to miss. A simple façade belies its importance to this rural community - a community which James Waninga has served passionately now for decades.

"I started here in 1994 as a vaccinator, going to the community to sensitize people about immunization," Waninga said. "I was interested because at that time there were so many children dying from whooping cough and other illnesses."

Today, as then, small health centers like Bushika are on the front lines of the battle for the health of rural Ugandans. In turn, volunteers like Waninga are the lifeblood of that effort, caring for the sick, reaching out to the community, and supporting clinic staff. As a vaccinator at the center, Waninga's job is to ensure that all of the children in the surrounding communities are immunized. This is a responsibility he takes personally.

"I come from this community; this is where I was born," Waninga said. "I feel that people here need health, so I want to help my community."

It is community-level healthcare the government of Uganda has struggled to provide. Decades of budget and staffing shortfalls, coupled with the challenges of reaching the country’s remote rural communities, have made national immunization efforts difficult. Faced with those challenges, local volunteers like Waninga play a crucial role in community immunization efforts, raising local awareness and informing the government’s national immunization campaign.

"Because we do immunization here daily we are busy, but we sensitize people around here and they take that word to spread," Waninga said.

BUILDING A NETWORK

It is exactly that level of support that the Maternal and Childhood Illnesses Secretariat (MACIS) seeks to provide on a national scale. Recognizing that immunization funding is not reaching underserved communities, MACIS is a network of 281 civil society organizations that links vaccinators, advocators and reporters for better coordination, coverage, and policy advocacy. MACIS harnesses the dedication of volunteers like James Waninga through community outreach efforts. At the same time, MACIS provides a linked structure across district, regional, and national levels so that community volunteers like Waninga can inform national immunization policy.

"CSO’s come in to supervise health centers like Bushika, then they report back to the Regional Node, who reports to the [national level] secretariat platform," explained Richard Wasikye, a Project Health Officer for the Coalition Against Poverty/Partnership Overseas Network Trust, a MACIS platform member in Uganda.
From there, Wasikye says, the data collected from rural communities is passed on to government policy makers to aid in allocating immunization resources countrywide.

**A DAY IN THE LIFE**

Conducting on average six outreach efforts each month from the Bushika Health Center, James Waninga and his fellow vaccinators are the first link in that chain. Volunteering at the center for seven hours each day, five days per week, Waninga says he sees about 200 children monthly for immunizations. Thanks in part to sensitization campaigns in the surrounding communities, Waninga says, he has seen dramatic changes in awareness since his early years at the center.

“Perhaps they could have died, but they are now healthy, and that gives me joy.”

To ensure long-term sustainability, MACIS collaborates with the national immunization effort, working closely with district level health officials and advocating for increased immunization funding at the national level. As a sign of the success of that effort, the platform’s district representatives were included in the 2015 budget for the national polio immunization campaign, as the government recognized the valuable role that civil society plays in mobilizing local communities.

And while national level advocacy is critical to long term sustainability, James Waninga measures success in more personal figures. Having provided vaccinations to Busanza’s children for more than 20 years, his connection to the community has grown deeper through the work he does.

“I’m very happy when I see kids that I have vaccinated who are now grown,” Waninga said. “Perhaps they could have died, but they are now healthy, and that gives me joy.”

“Since then the community members are more interested in vaccinating their children,” Waninga said. “More people are coming now for immunization and children are no longer dying from things like measles and polio.”