Apegnon Akpene is a 20-year-old mother of three children: four-year-old Joseph, two-year-old Romance, and one-month-old Akou Jacqueline. Since attending USAID's Action for West Africa Region, Phase II (AWARE II) community health worker training, she has become a client of family planning -- and a role model for family planning in her community.

Akpene is one of three community health workers in Diguegue, a small village of about 800 people in the hills of the southwestern forest separating Togo and Ghana. Distance and
difficult terrain are major hindrances to accessing health care for the inhabitants of the village. Diguegue is 47 kilometers from the nearest health facility, a small clinic, in the Prefecture of Tchifama. The village is served by a 12-kilometer dirt road that winds through the thick forest.

Akpene attended school for eight years. When she became pregnant at age 16, she was forced to drop out. She gave birth to three children within four years.

When the opportunity came to be trained as a community health worker, she eagerly volunteered. “Anything that gave me exposure to the outside world was welcome news,” she said. But problems stood in her way. First, her baby was barely a week old. Second, she herself was seriously ill and needed urgent medical attention. She was admitted to the hospital. She advised her husband, instead of visiting her in the hospital, to “attend the training, and later share with me what he learned.”

Fortunately, Akpene recovered just in time to join the community health worker training.

Today, Akpene knows the breadth of the USAID’s AWARE II package of integrated interventions in family planning, and maternal, newborn and child health. She knows the benefits of using contraception, and is now promoting family planning as a satisfied client. She has already recruited four women for family planning.

“I know my daughter was born too close to the previous one,” said Akpene. Thanks to her training, she said, “my daughter is in a safe pair of hands, and her survival is more secure than my first two children.”

Akpene said the decision to join the training to be a community health worker, “is the most important decision I ever made; I got the skills needed to save lives, my own first.”

*Niagia Santuah is consultant to the AWARE II project.*

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