Aisha Hajiya was devastated when she lost both of her children to lead poisoning in March 2010. But she was also angry and determined to prevent a similar fate for the other mothers and children in Abare, a tiny village in Zamfara State, northern Nigeria.

Due to her loss and her concern for her community, Aisha threw herself into a lead-poisoning sensitization campaign. She is now a vocal advocate of life-saving prevention and early treatment of lead poisoning. The Behaviour Change Communication materials that she uses were jointly developed by UNICEF and the Zamfara State Government, using a CERF allocation totalling $818,000. The funding has also helped train Aisha in facilitating dialogue among communities. She has since participated in campaigns targeting women and carers in affected areas across Zamfara State.

Aisha tells community members that children under age 5 are particularly at risk. Aisha knows this only too well: her oldest child was only 18 months old and her youngest just five months old when they died.

From her own experience, Aisha knew that the first step in saving her community’s children was to ensure that parents and caretakers recognized the symptoms of lead poisoning before it was too late. She also wanted to raise awareness of the underlying cause of the sudden outbreak: gold.

Encouraged by record global gold prices, artisan gold miners from Aisha’s village and neighbouring villages had increased their home-based operations since the beginning of the year. They were processing increasing amounts of ore from nearby mines and releasing huge quantities of fine lead particles into the air in their communities. While doing this, they unwittingly caused the world’s worst recorded outbreak of lead poisoning.

The adverse health effects ranged from death to impaired cognitive and behavioural development that can have lifelong consequences. Tens of thousands of people have already been affected in Zamfara and over 400 children have reportedly died from poisoning since the beginning of 2010. Many fear that communities are understating these numbers for fear of a Government ban on lucrative but illegal mining.

As well as helping to disseminate prevention and treatment messages on lead poisoning, CERF also provided a $1.2 million grant to WHO to provide medical care for the most severe cases among children under age 5. The grant was also used to decontaminate houses and villages. Both actions are critical, as medical treatment alone is ineffective if children are re-exposed to lead when they return to contaminated homes.