Sustaining Malaria Intervention Amid COVID-19: World Malaria Day 2020 Webinar

EVENT TAKEAWAYS

Held in advance of World Malaria Day, the webinar featured discussion on the importance of maintaining malaria interventions in the face of COVID-19. Panelists shared insights on the fight against malaria and COVID-19 in Nigeria, and how various sectors can cooperate to mobilize resources and mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the fight against malaria.

The webinar brought together over 225 participants from the private sector, international NGOs, academia, government organizations, and communities affected by malaria. GBCHealth partners Access Bank, Aliko Dangote Foundation, Abbott, Chevron, IQVIA, Sanofi, Sumitomo Chemical, and Vestergaard, among others joined the conversation.

SPEAKERS

- Ochuko Keyamo-Onyige, Nigeria Country Manager, GBCHealth/CAMA (Moderator)
- Nancy Wildfeir-Field, President, GBCHealth
- Prof. Olugbenga Mokuolu, College of Health Sciences, University of Ilorin, Nigeria
- Dr. Audu Bala Mohammed, Director/National Coordinator, National Malaria Elimination Programme (NMEP)
- Dr. Lynda Ozor, Malaria Programme Manager, WHO, Nigeria
- Dr. Melanie Renshaw, Chief Technical Advisor, ALMA, and Co-Chair, Roll Back Malaria CRSPC
- Omobolanle Victor-Laniyan, Unit Head, Sustainability, Corporate Communications, Access Bank and Co-Chair of CAMA
- Dr. Francis Aminu, Health and Nutrition Director, Aliko Dangote Foundation
KEY MESSAGES

- The campaign, #ZeroMalariaStartsWithMe, underscores the responsibility that all people and organizations have in the fight against malaria.

- Malaria elimination requires a multi-sectoral and multifaceted approach, focused on diagnosis, treatment, supportive care, prevention and more.

- Despite all the recent success against malaria, the COVID-19 pandemic threatens prior gains; it is testing the resilience of health systems and challenging malaria programs due to its effect on health workers, the shifted focus of the global and local community, the effects of public health measures such stay-at-home directives, the lack of availability of health services, heightened impact on vulnerable communities, and many other reasons.

- Every dollar we invest in the fight against malaria helps build stronger and more resilient health systems, which are central to combatting existing threats like malaria, and emerging ones like COVID-19. Robust systems and multi-sectoral partnerships help us fight the diseases we are already tackling, and make us more resilient to emerging challenges.

- The comprehensive package of malaria control interventions needs to be sustained and scaled-up despite the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

- We must do everything possible to maintain essential malaria services during COVID-19, which will require surveillance, protecting healthcare workers, de-risking supply chains, and other actions. Interventions must consider the importance of both lowering malaria related mortality and ensuring the safety of communities and health workers.

- The NMEP, alongside its network of partners, is working to mobilize funds and do everything possible to sustain innovative malaria interventions in Nigeria in these challenging circumstances.

- People are a society’s greatest asset, and the private sector understands its responsibility to invest in employee and community health to ensure a healthy and prosperous society, and to use its unique capabilities to strengthen health systems and partnerships.

- Responsible business action is a marathon, not a sprint.

- Investment in health is much more effective when done in partnership with other stakeholders and through a multi-sectoral approach. More than ever, we
must unite to protect our hard-won gains against malaria and effectively address existing and emerging threats to global public health

- Controlling, and ultimately eliminating, malaria would bring tremendous health, social, and economic benefits to people in sub-Saharan Africa and around the globe

You can watch the full webinar at this link and access the presentations here.

WEBINAR OVERVIEW

**A Pivotal Moment in Global Health History**

*Nancy Wildfeir-Field, President, GBCHealth*

Ms. Wildfeir-Field provided opening comments, setting the stage for the day's discussion. She emphasized that the myriad of ways in which the COVID-19 pandemic poses a threat to our fight against malaria makes today’s discussion all the more important.

She pointed out that like malaria, COVID-19 reminds us of the importance of prioritizing health, working to achieve universal health coverage and addressing the needs of vulnerable populations. She discussed how private sector has been and continues to be an indispensable advocate, partner and stakeholder in addressing epidemics, and many other health issues.

She highlighted some of the ways corporate programs can maximize their impact on health: by aligning themselves with national strategies and channeling investments into accountable, scalable and cost-effective programs; through innovative financing and public-private partnerships; through effective use of data, which can inspire political action, stimulate investment and drive significant outcomes and returns; and through innovation which can drive new systems, interventions, treatment and partnerships.

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**Bringing Malaria to Zero - A Collective Responsibility**

*Prof Olugbenga Mokuolu, Professor College of Health Sciences, University of Ilorin, Nigeria*

Through his presentation, Prof Mokuolu aimed to further set the tone and give context for the day’s conversation. He started by highlighting the #ZeroMalariaStartsWithMe campaign, emphasizing the responsibility that we all have in this fight, and framing the day’s conversation around this motto.

He provided updates on the Nigerian environment regarding malaria, highlighting the progress to date and the challenges that remain. He gave a technical overview of infection, as well as the integrated actions needed to reduce malaria-related deaths (including diagnosis, treatment, supportive care and prevention).

He discussed the *Pathway to Zero Malaria*, providing an overview of each of the three pillars of this initiative – *Zero Transmission, Zero Infections*, and *Zero Deaths* – to eliminate malaria worldwide.

Prof Mokuolu then explained a few other key elements in achieving zero malaria. He demonstrated how the role of government, environment and community planning – especially with regards to irrigation and related hygiene measures – affects malaria transmission. He also discussed malaria prevention and treatment tools, including bed nets, testing and treatments, and provided historical examples of the success of these interventions.

Finally, he returned to the idea of our collective responsibility for fighting malaria – #ZeroMalariaStartsWithMe – by discussing how individuals, governments and other partners have different but interconnected roles to play in getting malaria to zero.

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*How can national malaria programs and other organizations maintain and continue malaria intervention in the face of COVID-19?*

*Dr. Lynda Ozor Malaria Programme Manager, WHO, Nigeria*

Dr. Ozor’s presentation focused discussion on how the pandemic is testing the resilience of health systems and how we can ensure access to key interventions. She started with a status update on the National Malaria Strategic Plan – and the malaria burden overall – in Nigeria, building on what Prof Mokuolu had presented. She then gave an overview of the methods being used to strengthen health systems in malaria endemic countries and to achieve the goals that have been established in the fight against malaria.
Regarding COVID-19, she reinforced WHO’s directives to countries; that it’s not the time to scale back malaria initiatives. She then compared and contrasted the two diseases, highlighting the challenges caused by similarities in symptoms. She explained that the COVID outbreak is a concern for malaria programs because of the pandemic’s effect on health workers, the shifted focus of the global and local community, the effects of public health measures such stay-at-home directives, and many other reasons.

Finally, Dr. Ozor reiterated the need to optimize and sustain malaria interventions irrespective of these challenges and discussed what organizations and governments can do to accomplish this. She referenced WHO’s operational manual for maintaining essential services during COVID-19, which emphasizes the importance of surveillance, protecting healthcare workers, de-risking supply chains, and other recommended interventions.

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**Nigeria’s malaria programme continuity plan in the face of COVID-19**

*Dr. Audu Bala Mohammed, Director/National Coordinator, National Malaria Elimination Programme (NMEP)*

Through his presentation, Dr. Mohammed aimed to inform the audience about how the NMEP operates, as well as its approach in the face of COVID-19. He highlighted how the NMEP coordinates the malaria control activities in Nigeria, as guided by the Malaria Annual Operational Plan. He shared challenges being faced currently, such as those relating to the lockdown, availability of health services, problems with health workers on the frontlines, as well as modifications to interventions that are needed in these circumstances.

He gave a detailed overview of the NMEP’s core functions and COVID-19 continuity plan. Key points included the NMEP’s role in mobilizing resources, coordinating the malaria elimination activities of public and private partners, monitoring and evaluating implementation progress, supporting capacity-building, advocacy communications, and many other things. He also highlighted the various partners from the global and local levels that the NMEP works with in these efforts.

During the lockdown, he said, online efforts are becoming even more important for the NMEP, both internally and externally. He discussed how the NMEP is working and internally communicating in the face of COVID-19 challenges, and emphasized that the NMEP and its network of partners are working to mobilize funds and do everything possible to sustain innovative malaria interventions in Nigeria in these challenging circumstances.

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**Sustaining RBM Partnership's support for continuation of malaria services in Nigeria to mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic**

Dr. Melanie Renshaw, Chief Technical Advisor ALMA and Co-Chair Roll Back Malaria CRSPC

The RBM Partnership to End Malaria is providing support to countries to help sustain malaria essential services including prevention and case management during the COVID-19 pandemic. This support includes the provision of modified implementation guidance, remote and local technical and implementation assistance to support reprogramming, resource mobilization and planning, and high level advocacy and communication.

As an example, with almost 30 countries carrying out LLIN campaigns in 2020, RBM is supporting countries to adapt their campaigns to a door to door approach to minimize physical contact. This support includes updated guidance as well as implementation support through the Alliance for Malaria Prevention.

The Country and Regional Support Partner Committee (CRSPC) is working with countries to track stock availability of essential malaria commodities including LLINs, insecticide, RDTs and ACTs. Given there have been delays in delivery of essential commodities, RBM is working to support countries to avoid stock outs. Additionally, RBM is organizing regular checks in with countries to allow the identification of bottlenecks in real time, and will work to support countries to address these bottlenecks.

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**Investing in health including malaria and COVID-19 control: a priority for the private sector**

Omobolanle Victor-Laniyan, Unit Head, Sustainability, Corporate Communications, Access Bank and Co-Chair of CAMA

First, Ms. Victor-Laniyan discussed Access Bank’s corporate philosophy – its vision, mission and values – and how this philosophy leads to its focus on investing in health. She emphasized the importance of investing in the health of people (including their employees, customers, etc.), because people are the greatest assets of a society. She discussed how the private sector, through its role as the driver of the global economy, has the responsibility to invest in health to ensure a healthy and prosperous society.

She then took a look back at Access Bank’s actions in recent years, working through partnerships to improve African health systems (including CACOVID, the Coalition Against COVID-19), stimulate innovation, and advance advocacy and investments.
She emphasized that investing in health is not something that should be done alone, but in partnership with other stakeholders in order to increase impact.

Next, she shared her perspective on the COVID-19 pandemic, again reiterating the importance of not lessening our focus on malaria and other deadly diseases. She discussed similarities between the two diseases, such as the effect of COVID-19 and malaria on related vulnerable populations, and potential overlap in certain symptoms and treatments.

Finally, she provided a reminder that despite all the recent success against malaria, cases are again on the rise and the pandemic threatens prior gains. She ended with a call to action for other partners to increase their commitment to a multi-sectoral approach to fighting malaria and COVID-19.

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**Sustainable approaches to eliminate malaria – a private sector perspective**

*Dr. Francis Aminu, Health and Nutrition Director, Aliko Dangote Foundation*

Dr. Aminu began with an overview of Aliko Dangote Foundation (ADF), including its focus on developing a healthy, educated and empowered African populace. He then emphasized that funding is critical to malaria efforts, highlighting the importance of and relationship between domestic and international funding. He reinforced points made by previous speakers, including the importance of the core package of recommended malaria interventions, and the importance of prioritizing and scaling-up these interventions.

He then discussed the COVID-19 pandemic, and noted that while it is causing many challenges, the pandemic is demonstrating the power of corporate philanthropy, and multi-sectoral coalitions for solidarity, in an unprecedented way. He emphasized that ADF’s investments are not only focused on COVID-19 but in the context of long-term challenges, and guided by the need for continuous responsible business action. Dr. Aminu demonstrated the ways in which the capabilities of the private sector can complement public sector health efforts, highlighting how different sectors can contribute different strengths corresponding to their core capabilities to fight malaria.

Finally, he discussed how the ADF Malaria Program and Integrated Nutrition Program are working to strengthen and build sustainable health systems, and are adapting to the fight against COVID-19. He ended with a call to action for all stakeholders to ensure best practices are followed, and for the business community to work together to form alliances and catalyze a multi-sectoral network focused on transforming health, financial and other systems for now and into the future.