

A conversation with Samuel Asiedu Agyei and Gifty Tetteh, May 4, 2015

Participants

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Note: These notes were compiled by GiveWell and give an overview of the major points made by Mr. Asiedu Agyei and Ms. Tetteh.

Summary

GiveWell spoke with Mr. Asiedu Agyei and Ms. Tetteh of Episcopal Relief & Development as part of its investigation into the organization's *NetsforLife*® program as a potential recommended charity. Conversation topics included *NetsforLife*®'s pre-distribution activities, net allocation strategy, and monitoring and evaluation procedures.

Initiation of a new program

NetsforLife® may commence a program in a new location either because it receives an invitation from a local or church partner to begin a program in a certain country or because *NetsforLife*® performs its own analysis and establishes that a malaria intervention is needed in that country. In either case, *NetsforLife*® meets with its country-level partner, who will then introduce *NetsforLife*® to the government ministry or other entity responsible for malaria control and prevention, usually the National Malaria Control Program (NMCP). The NMCP or other relevant government body then assigns operational areas for *NetsforLife*® to cover. When *NetsforLife*® first started, it was often assigned more remote areas that the NMCP had limited ability to target on its own.

Pre-distribution activities

Community entry and needs assessment

Prior to every net distribution, *NetsforLife*® conducts a community needs assessment and discusses program plans with the community leadership. During this phase, called “community entry,” *NetsforLife*® attempts to familiarize the community with the program and encourages its members to participate fully in its implementation.

Malaria control agent (MCA) recruitment and training

The community entry process involves recruiting local volunteers, with the help of community leaders, to serve as MCAs. After recruitment, MCAs receive

comprehensive training in malaria prevention and correct use of nets, as well as some training in malaria treatment.

Baseline survey and household registration

Before training MCAs, *NetsforLife*® conducts a baseline survey, using either an independent consultant or a local partner to establish current levels of malaria knowledge and control efforts in the community. The survey asks about knowledge of causes, prevention, and treatment methods, as well as rates of net ownership and usage. This gives *NetsforLife*® a better idea of the community's needs by the time the survey is completed. After training, MCAs register households and educate the community on malaria prevention and the process for net distribution.

Net allocation

Country-specific protocols

Nets are typically distributed according to the number of sleeping places in each household. This is to ensure everyone in the household is covered with mosquito nets. However, some countries require that each household receives a certain number of nets (e.g., a minimum of two) regardless of how many nets it already has, so the criteria for selecting who gets a net depends on the country in which *NetsforLife*® is operating. Net allocation is usually handled by the MCAs' supervisors using the household registration data and NMCP recommendations.

Universal net distribution

In the past, nets were less widely available, so *NetsforLife*® limited distribution to vulnerable populations, such as children under the age of five and pregnant women, in accordance with guidelines from the World Health Organization. However, the influx of nets provided with support from the Global Fund in the last five to six years has allowed governments to distribute them more freely.

From an epidemiological perspective, covering an entire community provides better malaria control than a targeted distribution to its most vulnerable population. As a result, *NetsforLife*®'s goal since 2010 has been to ensure that all members of a community sleep under nets.

Although the household registration process is designed to identify who has nets and who does not, *NetsforLife*® has adopted a principle of supplying all household members with new nets, even those who already have them. This is part of an effort to encourage universal usage. *NetsforLife*® has observed that people prefer to sleep under new nets. Mothers especially want their newborn babies to sleep under new nets, so *NetsforLife*® provides pregnant women nets and promises to give an additional net to the family when the baby is born. Nets can also be diverted in unpredictable ways, such as being used for family members visiting from other regions or adolescent children returning from boarding school who were not present during distribution (and who may take nets with them when they leave). Nets may also deteriorate more quickly than expected, so it is useful for households

to have spare nets on hand. *NetsforLife*® believes that denying nets to those who already have them is of limited benefit, so it tries to distribute as many nets as possible to maximize access.

Effective targeting of intended beneficiaries

The pre-distribution household registration data provides a record of all households that receive nets. *NetsforLife*®'s own post-distribution evaluations also include net coverage surveys, which help identify community members who do not have nets. Community members involved in net distribution also monitor whether households are getting the appropriate number of nets.

Program monitoring and evaluation procedures

NetsforLife® has three main processes to verify that nets are being used and are in good condition, as described below.

MCA household visits

Before and after net distribution, *NetsforLife*®'s MCAs go household to household to educate residents on net usage, net maintenance, and malaria prevention. *NetsforLife*® encourages the MCAs to visit all households in their community every quarter for 18 months following distribution, for a total of six visits per household. Usually the MCAs target a certain number of households to visit by the end of each month and manage to visit a large portion of them. However, it is not clear whether MCAs are able to reach every household each quarter.

The message that the MCAs present varies with each household visit. Before the distribution, they give information on protection against mosquitos and causes and prevention of malaria. Immediately after the distribution, they give information on how to properly use and care for the nets. After about six months, when nets might have started deteriorating, they teach net repair.

During these visits, MCAs also check to see if the nets are being used correctly. A visiting MCA will ask a household member whether the nets in the house are being used. If the answer is yes, the MCA may ask for a demonstration. The household member will unfold the net, allowing the MCA to observe whether s/he knows how to use it correctly. If the MCA sees that nets are not used correctly, s/he will provide further training in net use. At other times, the MCA may simply ask the household members to self-report their usage without giving a demonstration. MCAs spend at least two days per week on household visits and may choose the time of day during which to conduct these visits. Some MCAs do this work more than two days per week.

Supervision, verification, and evidence of impact

Each team of MCAs has a supervisor, who conducts random checks of the MCAs' work, including verifying the number of households that MCAs report visiting. During MCAs' meetings with supervisors, they discuss challenges faced during field work and other topics. If there is evidence that improper net use is a significant

issue, the MCAs may recalibrate their approach to community education to concentrate more on correct use. In addition, during country visits, *NetsforLife*® staff sometimes conduct follow-up verification to confirm that MCAs have been to specific households.

NetsforLife® has not yet produced or analyzed data on whether MCAs' educational efforts correlate to higher rates of 'correct' net usage. However, the continuous follow-up at the household level has proven to be beneficial and has caused increased net usage. *NetsforLife*® records the number of households visited, but does not record information on how many households are using their nets properly, so it cannot say how many people were using the nets correctly before receiving education from MCAs.

Compensation

MCAs generally have a heavy workload, but are not paid wages for their work. Rather, they receive stipends during the registration and distribution periods. They also receive some remuneration for the follow-up visits and educational work they do outside of these periods. The amount of money MCAs receive varies from country to country, depending on cost of living and the size of the area the MCAs cover.

Follow-up surveys

NetsforLife® contracts independent researchers to conduct follow-up household surveys in their operational areas. Sometimes the independent researchers are the same researchers who conducted the baseline survey before the distribution. In the past, the surveys took place annually, but in the last three years *NetsforLife*® has extended the timeline so that surveys take place 18 months after distribution. This was done in order to avoid research fatigue and to try to gather additional information that will yield more significant results than the small variations seen year to year.

In addition to measuring net coverage, the researchers also check to see whether nets are being used properly. Some ask for a demonstration, while others rely on self-reported usage information from household members. *NetsforLife*® collaborates with the local partner on the selection of these researchers in the country which is responsible for commissioning the researchers.

Survey content

In all countries, the independent surveys look at a set of 17 core indicators related to net use and coverage within the community, and within those figures, net use and coverage among vulnerable groups (children under five and pregnant women). The reports produced by the researchers include the number of households they visit, the number of nets in each household, and whether the nets are used correctly. In some countries, the reports also include notes on net condition, i.e., whether the nets have holes and how many holes, but generally these do not go into great detail.

In some countries, *NetsforLife*® requests that the independent researcher adjust the survey to include additional indicators. For instance, *NetsforLife*® has requested that the Mozambique report include possible reasons for lower net use in urban centers. In Mozambique, net distribution was carried out primarily in an urban setting, however, there have been reports that residents of urban centers do not like to use nets. *NetsforLife*® hopes to learn from the survey whether this is true and what factors encourage net use within this demographic.

This year, *NetsforLife*® is having a survey conducted in Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) that will include an assessment of net distribution methods. *NetsforLife*® is testing two distribution methods, one in which nets are brought to households and hung for residents (house-to-house distribution with hang-up) and another that calls community members to a central meeting point (fixed point distribution) that relies on each household to hang its own nets. The additional data is meant to help *NetsforLife*® understand which method is more effective for net coverage and malaria control. The results of the DRC survey are expected by the end of September 2015. Several other new reports are expected to be completed this year.

Some of these reports are available through *NetsforLife*® headquarters, while others remain with country-level staff.

Country-level monitoring by *NetsforLife*® staff

Overview of country monitoring operations

NetsforLife® staff at the Episcopal Relief & Development regional office in Accra conduct partner field monitoring at least once a year. If a program in a particular country is experiencing difficulties, *NetsforLife*® technical staff may visit that local partner two to three times a year to help resolve implementation difficulties.

The local partner staff at the national-level in each country conducts field visits more frequently, approximately once a quarter. For example, out of 23 districts in Uganda, the national team has selected several districts to visit at the end of the second quarter, and will choose another set to visit at the end of the third quarter.

NetsforLife® informs country partners of its visits ahead of time. During a typical country visit, *NetsforLife*® spends the first three days in the field, including observing a registration day, and spends the fourth day analyzing the information it has gathered, using it to plan for the coming year. While in the field, *NetsforLife*® often meets with local leaders, who discuss how nets are distributed and monitored in their communities.

NetsforLife® also uses these visits as an opportunity to gather the community for mass education. The team often asks how many of the community members assembled have nets in their rooms, and asks the children how many of them sleep under nets.

NetsforLife® pre-selects which districts it will visit in some countries, based on the route the team will be traveling. On his last visit to Uganda, Mr. Asiedu Agyei visited five districts in northern and western Uganda, out of the 23 that *NetsforLife*® covers.

Health facility data

During country visits, *NetsforLife*® may meet with health facilities to get information on malaria rates, but these facilities do not always maintain good records. During these meetings, *NetsforLife*® sometimes hears anecdotes that malaria rates have fallen, but can get data to confirm this only upon further questioning. For example, on recent trips to Zambia and Zimbabwe, Mr. Asiedu Agyei met with health facility personnel who were able to provide month-to-month and year-to-year comparisons of malaria rates over two years. The facility staff told him that malaria rates had dropped from the previous year. When asked for evidence to back this up, the staff provided the data and *NetsforLife*® was able to confirm the decline.

Household visits

NetsforLife®'s local partner staff conduct household visits while in the field to monitor net usage, usually joining the NMCP staff as they carry out their own household monitoring, forming a team of four people. During household visits, *NetsforLife*®'s local partners observe the condition of the nets, ask for a demonstration of the nets' use, confirm that each household member is sleeping under a net, and check to see if the household has spare nets.

The households visited during these trips are generally pre-selected by the community leadership, but *NetsforLife*® sometimes requests to see randomly selected households as well. For example, on a visit to Mozambique, *NetsforLife*® noticed that all the nets were hung properly in pre-selected households, indicating that the residents had had advance notice of the visit. *NetsforLife*® then asked the country representative if they could visit randomly selected houses as well, and found that some of these houses had older nets. Based on this experience, *NetsforLife*® no longer believes that pre-selecting households is a good practice. *NetsforLife*® usually visits between 10 and 20 randomly selected households during these trips, making up approximately 10% of a community.

Results of country-level evaluation

Mr. Asiedu Agyei knows of only two districts in one country, Mozambique, where the state of net usage observed during a visit three to four years ago did not align with information provided by the MCAs. The number of nets being used in this case was much lower than the number of nets reported to have been distributed, even accounting for deterioration over time. Among the reasons given for this shortfall was flooding in some areas of Mozambique, which led to nets being diverted to replace lost nets in flooded areas. Since then, *NetsforLife*® has monitored this area and requested reports on net usage there. It has also distributed nets in Maputo District in Mozambique and has enlisted an independent organization to conduct an

evaluation of net coverage and usage in Maputo and provide a report. The director in Mozambique has indicated that net coverage and usage have improved in the districts of the country that were previously experiencing low usage rates.

Additional monitoring

A monitoring team, including national *NetsforLife*® staff and sometimes NMCP personnel, checks ongoing net distributions to ensure they are done correctly and sometimes checks on the nets post-distribution. In Uganda, for example, *NetsforLife*®'s activities are overseen by a national team from the church. Each of the 23 districts has a monitoring team representing the district-level health authorities, which chooses and trains volunteers from the community and oversees the work of volunteers and their supervisors. Some of these volunteers also serve as MCAs, while others are recruited for the distribution only, during which many more volunteers are needed. The district supervisory team reports to a district coordinating team, which gets data from the supervisory team and presents it to the national team. The national team shares this information with *NetsforLife*® technical staff in the Regional Office in Accra and the headquarters in New York.

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