

A conversation with Esther Cohen and Abigail Nelson, March 31, 2015

Participants

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Note: These notes were compiled by GiveWell and give an overview of the major points made by Ms. Cohen and Ms. Nelson.

Summary

GiveWell spoke with Esther Cohen and Abigail Nelson of Episcopal Relief & Development to gather information about the *NetsforLife*® program. Conversation topics included an overview of the *NetsforLife*® program, efforts to evaluate program effectiveness, room for more funding, Episcopal Relief & Development's other public health activities, and malaria elimination.

Overview of the NetsforLife® program

Description

NetsforLife® is a program of Episcopal Relief & Development, the international relief and development agency of the Episcopal Church. Episcopal Relief & Development primarily partners with local Anglican and Episcopal faith-based organizations to provide development programs. *NetsforLife*® is the organization's long-lasting insecticide-treated net (LLIN) distribution program. *NetsforLife*®'s main activities include educating communities about malaria and malaria prevention, training "malaria change agents" (local volunteers), distributing nets, and monitoring net usage over an 18-month period.

History

In 2007, some beneficiaries of Episcopal Relief & Development's programs in Zambia died of malaria. In response, Episcopal Relief & Development developed a net distribution pilot program, beginning in Zambia and Angola. Between 2007 and 2009, it distributed over 1 million nets in 17 countries. To fund the program, Episcopal Relief & Development established a collaborative partnership. Members included: the President's Malaria Initiative, Standard Chartered Bank, The Coca-Cola Africa Foundation, the J.C. Flowers Foundation, the ExxonMobil Foundation, and The Episcopal Church.

After the pilot phase, the program was scaled up over several additional phases to deliver first an additional 3 million and then an additional 10 million more nets. In

total, the program has delivered approximately 22 million nets and trained over 100,000 malaria change agents.

In 2014 alone, *NetsforLife*® delivered 10 million nets at a total cost of approximately \$1.2 million.

Methodology

NetsforLife® uses the “hang-up” methodology. In this approach, malaria change agents visit program households to install nets, make follow-up visits to ensure the nets are being used appropriately, and monitor attrition rates over time. Agents are well positioned to identify which households are in need of replacement nets (nets become damaged and ineffective) and which community members have not yet received nets.

In the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), *NetsforLife*® is currently collaborating with UNICEF on a study to determine which methodology, hang-up vs. the more common fixed-point approach, results in the best utilization of nets. The operational research study, done in collaboration with the University of Kinshasa School of Public Health, should be available by the end of 2015.

***NetsforLife*®’s role in net distribution**

Overview of the coordination process for net distribution

1. A national government submits a request to the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria (Global Fund) that includes funding for a net program. The request reflects the country’s national strategies for addressing these diseases. For example, in the case of malaria, a government might target universal coverage or focus on continuous coverage (the replacement of damaged nets).
2. The government receives funding from the Global Fund.
3. The government’s National Malaria Control Program (NMCP) maps out where nets need to be distributed and creates net distribution policies. In some countries, the NMCP will form a consortium with Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) to coordinate work in the field. For example, Population Services International (PSI) was given a mandate to coordinate net distribution in eastern DRC.
4. The NMCP or the consortium convenes meetings with NGOs and local organizations to assess community needs and determine which partners are best positioned to undertake net distribution mandates. For example, in eastern DRC, PSI might undertake the mandate itself or outsource it to another NGO (e.g. *NetsforLife*®).
5. Once the nets are distributed, program data is reported back to the NMCP, which is required to report to the Global Fund.

How NetsforLife® obtains a net distribution mandate

NetsforLife®'s methodology and hands-on approach are respected by other NGOs and local partners working within its geographical scope. It has established deep roots in the communities where it works and has a proven track record. As a result, these actors often contact *NetsforLife*® when a net distribution mandate becomes available.

When *NetsforLife*® receives a request and wishes to take on the mandate, it negotiates the terms based on its funding capacity (e.g. if a mandate is for 1 million nets and *NetsforLife*® can only fund the distribution of 100,000 nets, it will try to bring the quantity in line with its capacity). *NetsforLife*®'s bargaining power is contingent on how much funding it can bring to the negotiating table.

When *NetsforLife*® agrees to take on a mandate, it draws up a contract with its local partner to delineate each party's responsibilities under the brand and program activities. *NetsforLife*® oversees the program, but the local partner works with local health organizations and leaders to carry out the community-level work. *NetsforLife*® and its local partners have accumulated many years of experience collaborating on net distribution programs.

One example of this process is *NetsforLife*®'s work in the DRC. *NetsforLife*® has been hesitant to begin negotiations for a new mandate in the DRC after 2015 because *NetsforLife*® only has minimal funding to bring to the negotiating table. However, one of *NetsforLife*®'s local partners in Katanga, DRC was recently granted a distribution opportunity by a large NGO. The partner contacted *NetsforLife*® for assistance, and *NetsforLife*® is in discussions about funding:

- Education activities for the communities receiving nets
- Training for volunteers who will help with the distribution
- The logistical support necessary to transport the nets
- Post-distribution follow-up activities

Collaborations with other NGOs

It is common for NGOs, some of whom operate on a regional or national level, to form partnerships with other NGOs in order to complete net distribution work in the field. In 2014, *NetsforLife*® was included the following partnerships (this list is not exhaustive):

- *NetsforLife*® collaborated with UNICEF to distribute 800,000 nets in Maniema province in eastern DRC
- *NetsforLife*® trained volunteers participating in World Vision International's net distribution program in Mozambique on the *NetsforLife*® methodology and distributed nets in the Maputo area

Funding

Funding structure

NetsforLife® is not separately incorporated, and program funding is received and allocated by Episcopal Relief & Development. In the pilot phase, undesignated funds

and specific donor funds were used by Episcopal Relief & Development to support *NetsforLife*®. The program is now funded solely by funds that have been designated to fund malaria programs. Episcopal Relief & Development makes continual efforts to extend the reach of these funds by increasing the program's cost effectiveness. As it has scaled up the program, it has been able to significantly reduce the program's cost.

Funders often prioritize work in specific countries and designate funds accordingly. However, a portion of program funds must also be allocated to support the technical, organizational and logistical work done at the Episcopal Relief & Development head offices.

Fundraising

Initially, the program's cost effectiveness attracted significant funding from large private donors. After partnering with *NetsforLife*® for several years, some of these original funders have reprioritized their interests away from malaria and are exploring other initiatives. Episcopal Relief & Development is actively seeking new funders to support this work.

Episcopal Relief & Development also consistently seeks donations from Episcopal Church members for the *NetsforLife*® program.

Episcopal Relief & Development strongly believes in the *NetsforLife*® program and is committed to continue bringing the program to communities in need. It continues to actively solicit funds for the program from church, government, and private sources.

Efforts to evaluate program effectiveness

From the outset, gathering evidence to evaluate *NetsforLife*®'s effectiveness has been a priority; it is Episcopal Relief & Development's most data-driven program. Exxon Mobil Foundation representatives, such as Dr. Steven Phillips, have provided instrumental encouragement and guidance in this area over the years.

NetsforLife® has a significant amount of evidence proving the program's effectiveness in malaria prevention. A cost effectiveness assessment mandate was included in funding from the British organization Comic Relief for *NetsforLife*®'s work in Ghana. Evidence of the *NetsforLife*® methodology's effectiveness has helped the program influence national-level discussions on malaria interventions in countries such as Liberia and DRC.

Room for more funding

It is difficult to estimate *NetsforLife*®'s room for more funding, as its capacity to scale up is dependent on the future availability of free nets.

Capacity to scale up – 2015-2016

When the *NetsforLife*® program first started in 2007, the program cost was approximately \$11-12/net. This included distribution, education, and training costs,

as well as the cost of purchasing and shipping nets from the parts of the world where they are manufactured. In the following years, net acquisition became subsidized by the Global Fund on a global scale, and net access shifted to the countries directly where the nets would eventually be distributed. As the availability of free nets increased, *NetsforLife*® was able to scale up its operations and reduce program costs to approximately \$1-\$1.20/net in 2014.

Until the end of 2016, it is expected that the availability of nets will remain relatively constant. If it were to receive new funding during this period, *NetsforLife*® would have the capacity to scale up. The program would benefit most from multi-year funding.

Capacity to scale up – 2017 and beyond

NetsforLife®'s capacity to scale up is dependent on the continued availability of free nets for distribution. If the number of available free nets were to decrease, *NetsforLife*®'s costs would increase. It would have to cover net acquisition costs and scale down its operations, which would increase other program costs (e.g. distribution, training, and community education).

If fewer nets were available, it would also impact *NetsforLife*®'s capacity to distribute replacement nets. For example, in 2014 *NetsforLife*® delivered 5.8 million nets to 36 districts in Uganda in collaboration with local partners. If replacement nets are not available when these nets require replacement, it will not be possible to undertake a redistribution program. This could be especially dangerous for beneficiaries who, due to net usage, have had less exposure to malaria and, as a result, have become more susceptible to the disease.

Factors affecting net availability

1. Funding from the Global Fund

2015 is the final year of the Millennium Development Goal program, and the international public health community will soon be promoting the new sustainable development goals. There are concerns that the Global Fund might reduce funding for net acquisition beginning in 2017, which would reduce the number of nets available for distribution globally. (Funding has already been reduced for national and regional bodies responsible for convening net distribution meetings and coordinating distribution programs.)

2. Government priorities

Each government bases its request to the Global Fund on its national strategies for addressing the Global Fund diseases. The availability of nets is therefore dependent on the extent to which countries choose to prioritize malaria, and net distribution programs more specifically.

For example, 7 years ago, in most countries, malaria prevention strategies only targeted vulnerable individuals (e.g. children under 5, mothers, pregnant women, and the immuno-compromised). Many governments later switched to a universal

coverage strategy (which may be defined differently in different countries), leading to an increase in net availability. If this trend were to reverse, it would significantly reduce the number of nets available for distribution.

How *NetsforLife*® would allocate additional funding

Expand work to new areas within its geographical scope

NetsforLife® would use additional funds to expand the program's operations in the 17 countries in which it has worked. Working with trusted local partners increases the program's effectiveness, and there is still a significant amount of need in these countries.

For example, *NetsforLife*®'s work in Angola over the past 5-6 years has only covered 3-4 municipalities. These distributions have had a positive impact on child survival outcomes, and by scaling up to cover another 6 municipalities the program could impact the lives of hundreds of thousands more children.

Expand capacity to redistribute nets

NetsforLife® would like to increase its capacity to revisit communities in need of replacement nets.

For example, in Eastern DRC, *NetsforLife*® has distributed nets in North Kivu, South Kivu and Maniema provinces amongst other areas. With additional funding, it could collaborate with PSI to obtain new nets, determine which areas are in need of replacement nets, and undertake a redistribution program.

Other activities in communities where *NetsforLife*® operates

Episcopal Relief & Development also delivers programs targeting other pressing public health needs (e.g. diarrhea, and pneumonia under an iCCM program approach) in communities where *NetsforLife*® operates. These integrated activities were rolled out in Uganda and Malawi in 2014, and are being rolled out in Kenya, Ghana, and Zambia in 2015. The integrated health work is currently funded from different funding streams from the *NetsforLife*® program.

Malaria elimination

In some countries where *NetsforLife*® operates, other actors are pursuing a malaria elimination approach. Normally, individuals living in a malaria-ridden area who have a fever are assumed to have malaria (and receive treatment accordingly); individuals who have malaria but are asymptomatic will not receive treatment. The elimination strategy traces malaria prevalence by undertaking systematic testing of all individuals (symptomatic or asymptomatic) within a geographical area where malaria cases appear. People with malaria receive an official diagnosis and treatment and all in their area are also traced, tested, and if necessary treated.

This approach requires a significant number of diagnostic and other interventions. *NetsforLife*® does not pursue elimination activities, choosing to focus on prevention

through net distribution (which it considers to be a highly cost effective intervention). It has participated in some conversations on the topic of malaria elimination.

All GiveWell conversations are available at <http://www.givewell.org/conversations>