

A conversation with Rob Mather and Peter Sherratt, September 9, 2015

Participants

- Rob Mather – Founder and CEO, Against Malaria Foundation
- Peter Sherratt – Executive Chairman, Against Malaria Foundation
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Note: These notes were compiled by GiveWell and give an overview of the major points made by Rob Mather and Peter Sherratt.

Summary

GiveWell spoke with Rob Mather and Peter Sherratt of the Against Malaria Foundation (AMF) as part of its annual charity review process. Conversation topics included funding for non-net costs, funding for post-distribution check-ups, room for more funding, capacity constraints, and updates on planned distributions.

Targeting countries with net gaps

When deciding which countries to target for future net distributions, AMF typically reviews existing malaria data briefly and has conversations with people from a number of organizations including the Alliance for Malaria Prevention, the African Leaders Malaria Alliance, and partners in-country who may have attended task force meetings and may know what the net gap is and to what extent funders are involved. AMF also has regular discussions with people from various organizations including Malaria Advisory Group members with recent in-country experience.

While not all sources are equally reliable, there are enough sources to give a fairly reliable representation of which countries have net gaps. AMF is fairly confident that it is well-informed about this and is comfortable drawing conclusions from these sources.

Before approaching a country, AMF reviews existing data and increases its communication with various sources to gain a high degree of confidence that there is a net gap.

Room for more funding

AMF would ideally like to receive \$25 million from GiveWell's recommendation this year, although it could possibly productively use up to \$50 million and could have made a larger request. A grant for \$25 million would enable AMF to either fund all of the distributions in the 4 countries it is currently in discussions with, if agreements are signed in all countries, or offer to fill the net gap in Country I and Country C, which it would do over a period of several years to mitigate risk. It would not be able to fill the net gap in Country J, where the gap is about 8 million nets beyond what AMF is currently offering. With its current level of funding, AMF is not able to fully fund the net gap in any country.

If AMF were to fund the full net gap in Country I and Country C, it would not be able to fund distributions in the other countries it is in discussions with, and would need to maintain

open communication with all countries about the possibility that its available funding may change if agreements are signed with other countries. If AMF does not fill the net gaps in the 4 countries it is currently in negotiations with, the gaps may continue to exist and people may be unprotected for long periods of time.

Conditional funding

An unconditional grant would be preferable for AMF because it would be simpler and more transparent and would give AMF the flexibility to use funding as it sees fit. However, AMF would be happy with a grant from Good Ventures being conditional on a distribution agreement being reached, because despite AMF's confidence in its ability to reach distribution agreements, its lengthy discussions with Funder A may seem like cause for concern from an outside perspective. AMF would not consider accepting a conditional grant from a donor it had not worked with previously, but has a high degree of trust in Good Ventures and is comfortable with this possibility.

A conditional grant may cause some concern among partner organizations that AMF has not yet built strong relationships with, but this is only a slight disadvantage. The partners with which AMF has good relationships trust that it will deliver on its promises. In order to ensure its ability to fulfill its promises, AMF would wait to receive this grant before signing agreements with countries.

Allocations for future distributions

Of the \$6.2 million allocated for future distributions, \$400,000 is allocated for North and South Idjwi Island in DRC in 2015 and 2016, and \$5.8 million is allocated for the 2018 distributions to 4 districts in Malawi. If necessary, AMF may decide to use up to half of this funding sooner than planned.

Potential funding source

AMF will be having a conversation in November with a potential funder with significant resources allocated to philanthropy and is interested in donating to AMF. AMF does not yet know how likely it is to receive funding from this donor or what amount.

One country has a funding gap of approximately \$100 million of nets and \$100 million in non-net costs over the period 2016-2020, which is not expected to be filled. AMF is working closely with partners to plan distributions to this country

Capacity constraints

AMF has adequate capacity to carry out its current workload, but it seems likely that its workload will increase, and its need for additional staff will depend on how many agreements are signed in the near future and whether AMF funds PDCUs.

If AMF funds any amount of PDCUs, it will need to do a lot of additional work to ensure that the money is well-spent, and if it funds a large amount of PDCUs, it will likely hire someone capable of spending significant amounts of time in Africa and will build travel costs into its budget.

AMF has no plans currently to hire a large team, but will likely hire a programme manager and a second person in a programme support role in the near to medium term. AMF does not yet have a recruiting pipeline but expects that when it decides to hire for these positions it will be able to do so within 6 months.

Increasing efficiency

It would have been helpful to have an administrative assistant 9 months ago when AMF had a higher workload than usual, but it came up with strategies to work more efficiently and eliminated the need for additional staff.

When AMF began working with a new partner in DRC, there were some inefficiencies in the reporting process, and AMF created a series of templates to simplify the process and reduce the amount of work necessary for both AMF and the partner. AMF also leveraged technology to reduce its workload in reporting to various authorities. These two changes have reduced the amount of time spent on financial reporting by a factor of 5-10. These new systems have also enabled AMF to have current financial information available on its website.

Non-net cost per net

In Malawi, non-net costs come to about \$1 per net. In Nord-Ubangi, the non-net cost per net is at least equivalent to or possibly more than the cost of a net.

Documentation

Distribution proposals

The distribution proposal document has not been completed for all distributions because communications with in-country partners have made this less necessary. This document has in some cases been replaced by pre-distribution registration survey operations plan and distribution operations plan documents.

Pre-distribution registration survey operations plans

AMF now posts pre-distribution registration survey operations plans on its website. This became formalized as part of the effort to increase efficiency during the busy period about 9 months ago.

This will be part of the typical documentation for distributions in the future, except in cases where it creates an unnecessary burden. AMF is willing to be flexible, but hopes that the partner finds this to be a helpful way of communicating and summarizing plans.

Photos

AMF believes that it is less important to collect videos and photos now than it was in the past, when it was still developing its relationship with Concern Universal and wished to have photos and videos as additional evidence. Now, the primary purpose of collecting photos and videos is to enrich the factual and data driven reporting. Photos and video are

not particularly meaningful evidence when compared to the other verification AMF collects.

PDCU intervals

AMF's agreements with its distribution partners typically state that PDCUs should be conducted 6, 12, 18, 24, and 30 months after distribution, with a grace period of 1 month to allow for unforeseen delays. Causes of delays can include conflict over resources and weather. The first PDCU in Kasai Occidental was conducted 8 months after distribution rather than 6, due to an in-country resourcing problem. Part of AMF's work involves helping its partners to learn from their mistakes, and moderate delays are acceptable.

When a PDCU is delayed by about a month, the schedule for the following PDCUs typically does not change. If a PDCU is delayed significantly (e.g. by 3 months), it may be necessary to cancel the next one scheduled, but AMF works hard to ensure that this does not happen.

Nord-Ubangi

Consequences of delays

The upcoming distribution in Nord-Ubangi, a district of DRC, has been delayed. There were two possible windows of time during which nets could be distributed, and the first was not optimal for several reasons:

- AMF would have had to move quickly and it was not confident that the resources needed to carry out the distributions were in place.
- AMF was waiting to receive a report from IMA World Health (IMA), the distribution partner for DRC, about its distribution in Kasai Occidental, and to have a discussion with IMA about what went well in this distribution and what could be improved.
- AMF wanted to continue discussions with IMA about how the distribution to Nord-Ubangi was likely to be structured and the possibility of conducting a separate pre-distribution phase. These discussions have resulted in the decision to do separate pre-distribution and distribution phases, which would likely not have been possible if the distribution had gone forward on schedule.

The distribution was further delayed by the flow of the Congo River, which affects the transportation of goods from Kinshasa to northwest DRC and has dictated that the best time to do pre-distribution registration surveys will be in late October or November. The distribution will be carried out from January to March 2016.

IMA recently hired a dedicated technology manager, who would not have taken part in this distribution if it had taken place on schedule. The work of the technology manager and the additional time spent planning the distribution should ensure that the distribution runs smoothly when it does take place.

The nets are now en route to Nord-Ubangi and no more delays are expected. All other distributions planned for 2015 are expected to go forward without delays.

Concern Universal model

IMA previously carried out a distribution in Kasai Occidental, DRC, using the “hang up and track” model. For its distribution in Nord-Ubangi it will be switching to the model used by Concern Universal in its Malawi distributions. This model is expected to be a better fit for Nord-Ubangi for two reasons:

1. IMA had trouble accurately estimating the number of nets needed in Kasai Occidental, possibly because the population data it used and the information reported by community health workers were not as accurate as IMA expected. IMA has done less work in Nord-Ubangi and has a weaker presence there, and it is possible that the problems in Kasai Occidental could be more extreme in Nord-Ubangi.
2. Because of the large distances between villages and the nature of infrastructure in Nord-Ubangi, it is necessary to accurately estimate how many nets are needed in each village when pre-positioning them before distributions, because it is costly to transport them more than necessary. It is likely more cost-effective to gather and run logistics and operations on very detailed and reliable data.

Smartphone use

Smartphones will be used in Nord-Ubangi for pre-distribution registration surveys, distributions, data collection, and some parts of verification. The verification process involves collecting data electronically, printing out lists to show to community leaders, making annotations on the printed lists, using these annotated lists to verify data in villages, and then using smartphones during distributions to record what is distributed.

Verification of collected data

AMF is in discussions with IMA about methods of checking the accuracy of collected data. It plans to use Concern Universal’s “105% data collection” method, which involves a first round of data collection from 100% of households, followed by a second round of data collection from 5% of households, which is then compared to the original data. The structure of the data collection visits is still being discussed, and will need to take into account the difficulty of travel in DRC and the costs associated with multiple visits.

Emergency net distribution after flooding in Malawi

AMF’s four partners in Malawi, including Concern Universal, Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) Belgium, and GOAL Global, did well given the challenging and uncertain circumstances after the flood, and all four organizations have shared distribution reports with AMF.

Challenging circumstances included inconsistent availability of transportation, reprioritization of areas where nets were most needed, large transfers of populations from flooded to non-flooded areas, further flooding, and crossing borders. These factors led to delays and created a challenging and frustrating situation for people on the ground.

Non-emergency distribution

While some of the nets were distributed as emergency nets to the displaced populations who most needed them, others were distributed as non-emergency nets to people who had moved back to their original homes. This meant that the partner organizations had to work with local health centers and district health offices in addition to the emergency committees, which led to delays in the distribution of the nets. AMF released a steer requesting that the nets only be distributed if they are being used in emergency situations, because they were being taken from Dowa and leaving a gap that would subsequently need to be filled. As a result of this steer, the total number of nets distributed was reduced to 79,000 from a planned distribution of 130,000.

Cost of emergency net distribution

AMF covered shipping costs for the emergency nets and is funding PDCUs for this distribution, but all other costs were covered by general funding for the emergency, through which nets, food, water, tents, and other supplies were also being funded.

Malaria Unit in Malawi

AMF is in the process of creating and co-funding a "Malaria Unit" in Malawi with Concern Universal. The Malaria Unit will consist of several permanent staff members who will work on a variety of malaria control projects: improving malaria case rate data collection practices, monitoring the levels of malaria prevention and treatment supplies at local health centers, developing efficient methods to keep net coverage rates high in between mass distribution campaigns, and more. The Malaria Unit could potentially bring down costs of standard distributions and provide a strategic opportunity to share, support, and influence operational policies within Malawi's NMCP.

Ensuring adequate staff capacity

AMF wants to ensure that the 4 districts in which the Malaria Unit will conduct malaria control activities have adequate staff capacity. Concern Universal, the distribution partner in Malawi, does not currently have the funding to expand its staff.

The Malaria Unit will increase efficiency by dovetailing distributions and PDCUs with those in other districts and by hiring permanent staff. An increased staff at Concern Universal will enable the NMCP to work more closely with Nelson Coelho, who will be the Malaria Unit manager.

Working more closely with local health centers

AMF would like the Malaria Unit to work more closely with local health centers in all 4 districts to improve case rate data and extend coverage levels across a 3-year period.

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