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USING COMMUNITY VOLUNTEERS TO FIGHT MALARIA AT THE VILLAGE LEVEL



EROBRE, Ethiopia – Baru Kura serves as an important link between the regional health authorities and the people in his remote Hamer village of Erobe in Southern Nations Nationalities and Peoples Region (SNNPR).

For the past five years, Baru has been a health volunteer promoting malaria insecticide-treated nets (ITNs), as well as other preventative health care measures like immunisation, to members of his community.

“I teach them about the transmission of malaria from mosquitoes biting people,” said Baru, who translates the messages conveyed to him by the Amharic-speaking health personnel into the local language of his village. “It’s for the benefit of the children. Although there is no payment for my services, I’m happy to do it as a service to my community. I get respect from the community – when they have a health problem, they come to me for advice.”

More than 4 million cases of malaria are reported annually in Ethiopia. However, the actual number of cases is believed to be much higher since many sufferers may not have access to public health posts and attempt to treat themselves at home. In bad years, when climatic conditions are conducive to massive increases in mosquito and malaria parasite populations, 50 million people in the country may be at risk of contracting the debilitating disease. It is estimated that only 20 per cent of children under five that contract malaria are treated at health facilities.

UNICEF supports the Ethiopian Government’s Roll Back Malaria (RBM) Partnership, which includes WHO, UNDP, the World Bank, the private sector and a number of NGOs. The goal of the RBM partnership is to reduce malaria through effective treatment and prevent new infections via use of preventative measures such as ITNs and Indoor Residual Spraying (IRS). UNICEF supports the Government’s efforts in combating malaria with community-based interventions and Information, Education and Communication (IEC). UNICEF assistance



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focuses on areas with high malaria incidence and to those most vulnerable, like pregnant women and under-five children, particularly in rural areas.

Baru's wife, Dieramu Kora, is expecting her fifth child in a few weeks. She hopes it will be a boy to join the four girls that she and her husband already have. The whole family sleeps under the ITN that covers their bed in the *tuckle*, or hut, that is their home. Despite the expense, Dieramu feels that the net is a wise investment to protect herself, her unborn child and the rest of the family from the deadly disease.

"Eighteen birr (about \$2) is a lot for us. But we believe our health is a priority and worth that 18 birr," Dieramu said. "We bought the net to prevent mosquito bites, because malaria comes from mosquitoes. With the net, it's better – there's no malaria now."



Over the past four years, UNICEF has assisted the Government to distribute over 1.4 million ITNs to at risk populations in Ethiopia. During the 2003 malaria emergency, UNICEF also supported large scale procurement and distribution of anti-malarial medicines and ITNs and provide support for indoor residual spraying and logistical expenses.

The Government and UNICEF are working together to strengthen partnerships and increase resource allocation for Ethiopia's Roll Back Malaria programme, including advocacy for reduced taxes and tariffs on mosquito nets and insecticides. UNICEF actively assists the Government to promote the use of ITNs, train health workers in malaria prevention and control, strengthen skills to help educate communities and provide timely pre-positioning of essential drugs, medical supplies and equipment.

In addition, malaria prevention and control is one of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) with a target of halting and beginning to reverse the incidence of malaria worldwide by 2015. Malaria prevention and control is also essential in order to achieve the MDGs improving maternal health and reducing child mortality.

"Globally, malaria is responsible for killing more than 1 million children a year – most under the of age five. Malaria is the biggest killer of children in Africa," said UNICEF Representative Bjorn Ljungqvist. "By preventing mosquito bites and killing the malaria-carrying mosquito, insecticide-treated bed nets can dramatically reduce malaria infection and deaths. UNICEF supports community education programmes to improve local knowledge about malaria prevention and the proper use of treated bed nets. These

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programmes teach people how to recognize malaria symptoms and the importance of treating malaria promptly.”

Using community health volunteers, like Baru, is an essential component in the fight against malaria, agrees Meskele Lera, Head of the Disease Prevention and Control Department for SNNPR.

“The health system should be built on community ownership of health programmes,” Meskele said. “To do this, we have created community health promoters from the community themselves. They have become role models of health practices from malaria to sanitation to family planning to immunisation. They practice what they preach in their own households and become role models for the community. When they see someone familiar to them they will emulate their experiences and improve their own health standards.”

The Ethiopian Government, with assistance from UNICEF, is strengthening the malaria component of the Integrated Management of Childhood Illnesses (IMCI) project, an integrated, holistic approach that aims to improve child survival by tackling the main diseases that affect children under five. IMCI provides a health package that will help reduce not only the negative effects of malaria, but also acute respiratory infection (ARI), diarrhoeal diseases, measles, and malnutrition. All together, these diseases are responsible for 70 per cent of childhood morbidity and mortality in Ethiopia. Integration of malaria in IMCI and other health interventions is also expected to be a more cost-effective strategy for improving the health of Ethiopia’s children.

Baru plans to buy another net to help protect his expanding family from the risks of malaria. “I know how important it is,” he says. “I even want an additional net for her (Dieramu), since she is due in one month, to protect her and the baby.”