

Implementing effective community engagement for malaria control and elimination: Opportunities and challenges



In 2015, the RBM Partnership called on malaria programs to involve communities in the design and implementation of malaria interventions and innovations.¹ However, the operational criteria for effective community engagement are poorly defined. This background paper outlines key elements of effective engagement and identifies practical opportunities for national malaria programs and funders to improve community engagement. The paper combines results from published and grey literature, key informant interviews, community-based focus group discussions, and expert opinion.

In this research brief, we summarize the paper findings specifically for use by national malaria programs and funders.

Summary of Findings and Recommendations

Certain underlying principles of community engagement were affirmed by key informant interviews, focus group discussions, and literature results. Effective community engagement is:

- Built on trust and transparency
- Proactive, continuous, and integrated
- Adaptable and responsive to the local context
- Collaborative
- Inclusive

To operationalize these principles, key actions are required by national malaria programs and funders. We first propose that a common definition ([Box 1](#)) and quality standards for community engagement be embraced by all malaria partners.

¹RBM Partnership to End Malaria. Action and investment to defeat malaria 2016–2030: for a malaria-free world.

Box 1. Defining community engagement for malaria programs

Effective community engagement is a participatory process in which community stakeholders are actively involved in the design, governance, delivery, monitoring, and evaluation of malaria services.

As a participatory process, effective community engagement must go beyond *what* activities and strategies are implemented and consider *how* those activities are designed, implemented, monitored, and evaluated and *who* is involved. (See [Figure 1](#) on next page.)

Key Actions for National Malaria Programs

- **Encourage district health units to map and work with existing community platforms** (e.g. village health committees) and organizations that already work on malaria and/or community engagement. If none exist, work with community leaders to build new platforms.
- **Recruit trusted, community-identified representatives** to get involved. Ensure these platforms represent a cross-section of community sub-groups.
- **Link community platforms with the health system** by developing policies, SOPs, and accountability frameworks together.
- **Co-create malaria action plans with communities.** Use participatory methods and techniques to identify community needs, challenges to uptake, local capacity, and resources. Together with all partners, outline roles, responsibilities, and expectations.
- **Coordinate routine community engagement activities through administrative units geographically as close as possible to the**

Figure 1. Continuum of community engagement

	INCREASING LEVEL OF PUBLIC IMPACT				
	Inform	Consult	Involve	Collaborate	Empower
Goal	Provide balanced and objective information in a timely manner.	Obtain feedback on analysis, issues, alternatives, and decisions.	Work with the public to make sure that concerns and aspirations are considered and understood.	Partner with the public in each aspect of the decision-making.	Place final decision-making in the hands of the public.
Promise	We will keep you informed.	We will listen to and acknowledge your concerns.	We will work with you to ensure your concerns and aspirations are directly reflected in the decisions made.	We will look to you for advice and innovation and incorporate this in decisions as much as possible.	Together, we will work to implement the strategy you decide.

Adapted from: IAP2 Continuum of Public Participation.

- **community** to ensure health services are responsive to the local context, adaptive to changing circumstances, and better integrated and harmonized with other health and development programs.
- **Identify opportunities to include more local health units and community representatives in health planning, intervention design, implementation, and evaluation**, for example during national strategic planning, mid-term, and program reviews.
- **Train national malaria program staff, middle managers, frontline staff, and community representatives on participatory tools and techniques** such as interpersonal communication, co-design, facilitation, and team building.

Key Actions for Funders

- **Promote this definition of community engagement** (Box 1) and incorporate the UNICEF Minimum Quality Standards and Indicators for Community Engagement in grant development guidelines.
- **Recognize that the main costs to strengthening community engagement will be building human and community capacity** and incentivize malaria programs to invest in community systems strengthening.
- **Anticipate realistic time and costs associated with implementing effective community engagement.** Flexibility to adjust activities and budgets in accordance with results from community engagement is required.

- **Ensure that community engagement mechanisms are not only described in funding proposals, but are also represented in the actual programming, budget narrative, and M&E frameworks.**
- **Develop budgetary frameworks that consider costs associated with effective community engagement facilitation** including: staff, materials, transportation, partner coordination, capacity development, information sharing activities, and developing and maintaining feedback mechanisms.

The full report is available at shrinkingthemalariamap.org/backgroundpapers/communityengagement

The Malaria Elimination Initiative (MEI) at the University of California San Francisco (UCSF) Global Health Group believes a malaria-free world is possible within a generation. As a forward-thinking partner to malaria-eliminating countries and regions, the MEI generates evidence, develops new tools and approaches, disseminates experiences and builds consensus to shrink the malaria map. With support from the MEI's highly-skilled team, countries around the world are actively working to eliminate malaria – a goal that nearly 30 countries will achieve by 2020.

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