

Short Communication

Galvanizing Communities towards Zero Malaria in Nigeria: An Account of 2019 World Malaria Day in Bayelsa State

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ABSTRACT

Nigeria had a vision of zero death from malaria by 2020 and was making efforts to achieve the goal. Reducing malaria mortality or eliminating malaria requires community ownership and active participation. This paper describes activities carried out in Bayelsa State to commemorate the 2019 World Malaria Day – an important global event towards eliminating malaria. Several organizations in the state collaborated to organize the event and used various media to spread the key messages of the day. Inadequate resources however limited full commemoration. A better-funded event in the future has potential for a larger impact.

Keywords: Bayelsa State, Malaria, Nigeria, World Malaria Day

LITERATURE

Despite being preventable and treatable, malaria continues to have a devastating impact on families, communities, and countries. Africa continues to bear the heaviest burden of the disease, accounting for 93% (213 million) of all cases and 94% (380,700) of deaths worldwide.¹ Nigeria accounts for 25% of the global burden of the disease and tops the list of the 11 high burden countries that account for 70% of all malaria cases and deaths globally.² The WHO, in its Global Technical Strategy for Malaria (GTSM), has set new targets for a world free of malaria and these include

reduction of mortality rates and case incidence globally to at least 90% by 2030.³

An underpinning principle for the attainment of the GTSM is country ownership with involvement and participation of communities.³ For this to happen, communities need to be properly mobilized using multiple approaches. One major strategy of mobilizing communities for action against malaria is World Malaria Day (WMD).

World Malaria Day is one of the nine major days and two weeks marked by World Health Organization

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(WHO) member States annually as “official” global public health days.⁴ World Malaria Day, which was first commemorated in 2008, started as Africa Malaria Day in 2001.⁵ World Malaria Day is marked annually on the 25th of April and is a day to increase awareness and mobilize individuals, communities, governments and nongovernmental organizations in both affected and malaria-free countries to continue to invest and sustain their commitment towards the elimination of the disease. The theme for 2019 is “zero malaria starts with me” and is intended to move individuals and empower their communities to take ownership of malaria control activities.⁶

Nigeria has an ambitious goal of reducing malaria mortality to zero by the year 2020.⁷ Annual commemoration of WMD is listed as a strategic activity to maintain high knowledge of malaria prevention and treatment practices.⁷ This paper describes 2019 WMD commemoration in Bayelsa State.

Bayelsa State is one of the 36 States in Nigeria and one of the six States that make up Nigeria's south south geopolitical zone (figure 1). The State is divided into eight local government areas (LGAs) and has a projected population of 2,470,50 for 2019. Oil and gas

exploration is extensive in the state and contributes over 30% to the country's petroleum production. It has the highest prevalence of malaria (31.4%) in the zone – a figure above the national average of 27.4%.⁸

The State Malaria Elimination Programme (SMEP) is a division in the Department of Public Health in the State Ministry of Health and is headed by a Programme Manager. Though the state did not have an annual operational plan for the year, it planned and budgeted for 2019 WMD. The plan included purchase and distribution of 40,000 long lasting insecticidal net (LLINs); commencement of a quarterly mentoring exercise for households on use of LLINs; promotion of testing before treatment using rapid test kits; and use of artemisinin-based combination therapy (ACT).

The Departments of Community Medicine of the Federal Medical Centre Yenagoa, Niger Delta University Teaching Hospital Okolobiri and the Association of Public Health Physicians of Nigeria (APHPN), Bayelsa State Chapter teamed up with the SMEP in a series of activities to mark the day. Notable activities include:

1. Press briefing by the Permanent Secretary of the State Ministry of Health at the state secretariat to flag off

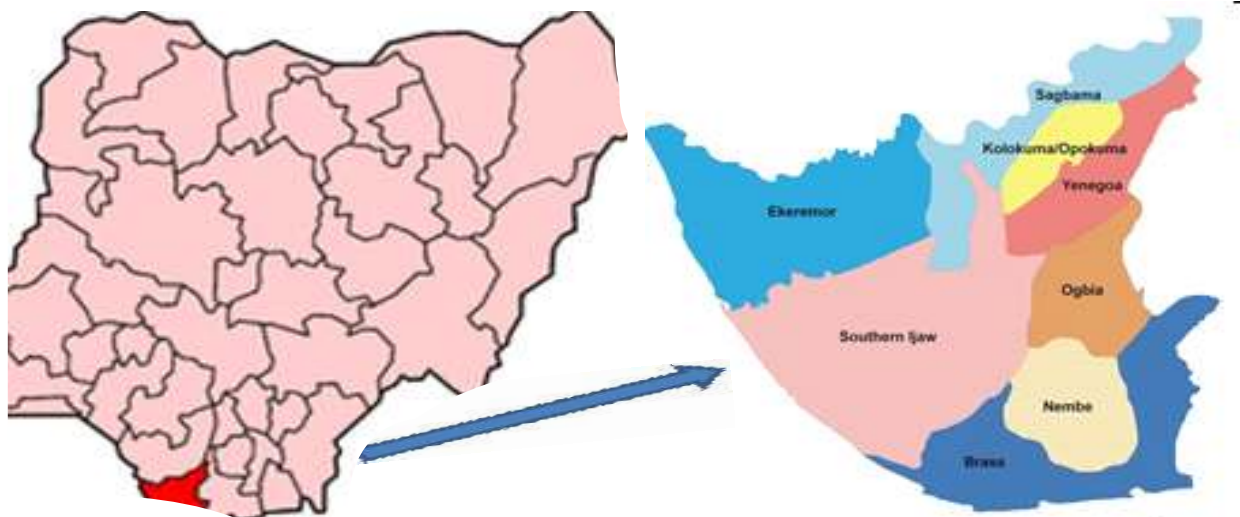


Figure 1: Map of Nigeria showing Bayelsa State

activities for the day.

2. A talk on malaria was delivered in antenatal and general outpatient clinics in health facilities across the state. The key messages of the day were emphasized.
3. Distribution of 400 LLINs donated by Bayelsa State Saving One Million Lives Program for Results (SOML PforR) - a World Bank assisted project running in the state. The nets were given to pregnant women and under five children mainly at the health facilities.
4. Free malaria rapid diagnostic test (mRDT) was carried out for symptomatic patients and those found positive were treated free with artemisinin-based combination therapy (ACT) in many centres. For example, at the state secretariat, 9 adult civil servants were treated out of the 186 participants that were tested.
5. An outreach programme was organized at a community town hall in Otuoke (the hometown of the immediate past President of Nigeria) in Ogbia LGA. In addition to a health talk on malaria, free mRDT was conducted on 50 persons (number of available mRDT). ACT was given to the 10 persons that tested positive.
6. Selfie cards displaying key messages on malaria were posted on Facebook and WhatsApp. The logo for the day was also used as WhatsApp status update or profile photo of various team members.
7. Two radio stations - Silverbird Rhythm 94.7FM (private) and Radio Bayelsa 97.1FM (public) - gave free air time to support the day. The SMEP Programme Manager and two other doctors talked about issues around the theme of the day, the necessity of testing before treatment, use of recommended drugs, and the need for regular use of LLINs to prevent malaria.
8. Local Government Area (LGA) malaria focal persons carried out sensitization activities in some secondary schools across the eight LGAs in the state. Banners and posters designed with the theme of the day were displayed in all the centres where the event was marked. There was also airing of jingles on radio and television sensitizing residents of the state before, on the day and days after to reinforce the message of the WMD.

The WMD has become a flagship event in the toolbox for the elimination of malaria. Though the SMEP planned 2019 WMD to be a much larger state-wide event with notable activities in all the eight LGAs, limited financial resources greatly hindered the plan. A collaboration involving tertiary hospitals, a professional association and the SMEP was however able to achieve some results. Physical events like rally and road walk, typical of mass communication for a day like WMD was absent. But beyond the small number of people present in the few places of physical activities, we believe the message of the day reached a much larger audience through social and electronic media that were employed. There is a need to reinforce the key messages of the day throughout the year by continuous public engagement.

News from around the country shows similar low-key events in many other states largely due to poor funding.⁹ Given the current malaria indices, Nigeria is unlikely to meet the target of zero mortality attributable to malaria by 2020.⁷ At the time of the event, Bayelsa state government was in the process of securing a World Bank-assisted project to support its activities and was also making efforts to attract partners into the state. With increased investment from both the state and federal governments and non governmental bodies, Bayelsa can rapidly scale up its control efforts and achieve zero malaria in the near future.

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