

# Preventing Malaria: Mixing Public Health Interest with Private Profit



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*Neale MacMillan*

[Photo: Ghanaian women soaking bednets in an insecticide.]

For most African children, the whine of mosquitoes is a familiar sound as they fall asleep. It is a sound with often deadly implications, because chances are high that some of the mosquitoes carry the parasite that transmits malaria, a potentially fatal illness for small children.

But when a child's bed is protected by an insecticide-treated net (ITN), no mosquito can reach the child. Indeed, mosquitoes will probably avoid the bedroom because of the deterrent quality of the insecticide. Unfortunately, there are millions of children — and adults — who do not sleep beneath such nets. That fact alone helps explain why over 2.5 million people, mainly young children, die from malaria each year, mainly in Africa.

## Disease reduction

Studies have shown a 20 to 63% reduction in malaria disease rates following the introduction of insecticide-treated nets. But African governments do not have the resources to provide ITNs to large numbers of their citizens, let alone to entire populations. Nor can they ensure that the nets are retreated every six months with pyrethroid insecticide, a biodegradable material that is safe for humans. But more people could use nets if governments joined forces with selected private-sector partners and donor agencies, according to research done by [PATH Canada](#) as part of the [Net Gain for Africa](#) program, funded through the International Development Research Centre (IDRC). (In a [related initiative](#), IDRC is sponsoring efforts by the Waterloo, Ontario-based [Mennonite Economic Development Associates](#) to encourage private sector investment in ITNs.)

Although ITNs are a proven way to reduce malaria risk, many families who need the nets are not using them. One reason is that 20 to 40% of Africans have no cash income, explains [Catherine Reed](#), the program coordinator at PATH Canada. Some people will never be able to afford a net. For this group, free or subsidized ITNs should be provided through the work of governments and aid agencies such as UNICEF, argues Reed.

## Moderate incomes

At the other end of the socio-economic scale is the wealthiest quarter of the African population, many of whom already have nets in their homes, says Reed. In between the richest and the poorest are those with low to moderate incomes, but no nets. People in this category could afford to shift their spending priorities to acquire one or more nets. They include the 50% of Ghanaian families (some 1.6 million families) that spend money on coils, repellents, and sprays — tools that are less effective than ITNs in controlling mosquitoes.

Reed says that the popularity of nets seems to have less to do with a country's wealth than with local traditions. For instance, there is a stronger tradition of net use in Burkina Faso, a fairly poor country by African standards, than in its more affluent neighbour, Ghana. "Tradition is very important. What we're trying to do is to create tradition," stresses Reed. In some sense, she actually means *recreating* tradition, because a report by PATH Canada notes that nets were used in Ghana until the 1970's, a period of political upheavals. But they did not return to widespread use after stability was restored. Similarly, civil strife and war in Uganda during the 1970's and 80's interrupted the tradition of net use there, never to return.

## Draft proposal

PATH Canada, in collaboration with BASICS ([Basic Support for Institutionalizing Child Survival](#) — a project of the US Agency for International Development), has presented a draft proposal to Ghana's Ministry of Health to launch a public-commercial partnership for the sustainable marketing of insecticide-treated materials. If successful, Reed foresees the partnership model serving as a pilot for adoption by the [World Health Organization's](#) *Roll Back Malaria* campaign and eventually being proposed to other African countries.

The PATH Canada/BASICS proposal recommends first that market researchers investigate the tastes and lifestyles of the target consumers. Based on the research results, the logistics of supplying ITN products would be explored with netting and insecticide manufacturers, importers, and retailers. This step could involve major international firms such as SC Johnson Wax Company and Rhône-Poulenc, and smaller Ghanaian companies. According to Reed, firms that wish to participate will use existing distribution pipelines to deliver good-quality and affordable products to the marketplace. "The private sector must make a commitment. You expect some contribution from private suppliers if you are helping to create a market."

## Stimulating demand

Once supply is ensured, the proposal recommends creating a market and stimulating demand for malaria control and ITNs. This would require education efforts to inform consumers about the links between mosquitoes and malaria, and the efficacy of treated nets, followed by advertising campaigns to promote ITNs. In Ghana, there are both home-grown and global advertising firms capable of mounting sophisticated mass-market campaigns.

The proposed project is "the first instance in Africa of a truly ministry-led project [for promoting ITNs] that is going to harness the potential of the private sector and the potential of donor support," states Reed. She adds that her organization's relationship with Ghana's Ministry of Health — critical to developing this proposal — did not bloom overnight. "It is built on two years of the *Net Gain for Africa* program and previous work on ITNs with IDRC funding" — efforts that earned PATH Canada its credibility.

*Neale MacMillan is a writer/researcher based in Hull, Quebec, who specializes in international development, the environment, and urban issues. (Photo: A. Haaland, IDRC)*

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## **Resource Persons:**

**Catherine Reed**, Program Coordinator, PATH Canada, One Nicholas Street, Suite 1105, Ottawa, Ontario K1N 7B7 Canada; Tel: (613) 241-3927; Fax: (613) 241-7988; E-mail: [path@synapse.net](mailto:path@synapse.net)

**Jerry Quigley**, Program Director, Mennonite Economic Development Associates, 155 Frobisher Drive, Waterloo, Ontario, N2V 2E1, Canada; Tel: (519) 725-1633; Fax: (519) 725-9083; E-mail: [Jerryquig@compuserve.com](mailto:Jerryquig@compuserve.com)

**Don de Savigny**, PhD, IDRC/EHIP Research Manager, Tanzania Essential Health Interventions Project, Ministry of Health, PO Box 78487, Dar es Salaam, Tanzania; Tel: (255-51) 130-627; Mobile Tel: (255-811) 321-672; Fax: (255-51) 112-068; E-mail: [desavigny.tehip@twiga.com](mailto:desavigny.tehip@twiga.com)

**Nigel Motts**, Senior Program Officer, IDRC, Regional Office for Southern Africa, PO Box 477, WITS 2050, South Africa; Tel: (27-11) 403-3952; Fax: (27-11) 403-1417; E-mail: [NMotts@idrc.org.za](mailto:NMotts@idrc.org.za)

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## **Links to explore ...**

Sidebar: [Encouraging Private Sector Investment in Insecticide-Treated Bednets](#)

IDRC Reports, April 1994: ["Health Research That Matters"](#)

[Bednets for Malaria Control](#), by Robert Bourgoing

[Global Forum on Health Research: Diverting Resources Toward the South](#), by Keane Shore

[The Essential Health Interventions Project: Improving Health Care in Tanzania](#), by Kanina Holmes

[Net Gain: A New Method for Preventing Malaria Deaths](#)