

# **AFRICAN MEDIA AND MALARIA RESEARCH NETWORK**

*Together we can do it!*

**(Concept Paper: First draft.)**

*A project of Women, Media and Change  
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## **BACKGROUND**

The African Media and Malaria Research Network (AMMREN) was launched in November 2006 on the heels of a workshop on reporting on malaria research in Accra, Ghana. The network creates a common platform for African journalists and scientists to work together on efforts to eradicate malaria, which is endemic in most parts of the continent and is the number one killer of children under five.

The November 6 to 10 workshop was co-hosted by the INDEPTH Network, the Malaria Clinical Trials Alliance and Women, Media and Change.

INDEPTH is an international platform of sentinel demographic sites that provides health and demographic data and research to enable developing countries set health priorities and policies based on longitudinal evidence.

The Malaria Clinical Trials Alliance is an INDEPTH project established to conduct clinical trials of new drugs and vaccines to fight malaria. MCTA works in partnership with the Malaria Vaccine Initiative and Medicines for Malaria Venture to provide training and technical assistance to research centres in nine African countries — Mozambique, Malawi, Tanzania, Kenya, Ghana, Nigeria, The Gambia, Gabon, and Senegal.

The 19 print and electronic journalists at the Accra workshop were drawn from these countries.

Women, Media and Change is a Ghanaian non-governmental organisation established in 1994 in response to the need to promote effective use of the media to advance women's interests. Over the past six years, WOMEC has trained media practitioners on various special interest areas such as HIV/AIDS and other health-related issues and gender mainstreaming in general.

### **MALARIA: AN OVERVIEW**

It may be little, but the female anopheles mosquito is one of the most lethal insects known to man. The proud creature that breeds in stagnant, but clear, water and unexpected places such as your flower pots, is the bearer of the malaria parasite that has wreaked havoc in many African countries.

Between 700,000 and 2.7 million people die every year of malaria, over 75 percent of them African children. Children aged under five, pregnant women and their unborn children and the elderly are the most vulnerable. Two thousand African children die of malaria daily.

Fewer than 20 percent of illness and deaths arising from malaria are dealt with within the formal health system. They represent the “ears of the hippopotamus”, with the bulk of those affected operating below the surface.

Most victims of malaria are poor, and they are more likely to try home treatment before they present at health facilities. They will have tried self-prescription, which complicates matters by fostering resistance to conventional medicine, or they will have resorted to herbal treatment. Either way, home-based treatments are rarely complete or correct. Yet, with the right information, malaria is easily controlled and treated.

In recognition of the toll malaria takes on life in Africa, continental heads of state and government met in Nigeria in 2000 and came up with the Abuja Declaration setting targets for tackling malaria. They made a commitment that, by the end of 2005, about 60 percent of people at the highest risk of malaria (essentially children and pregnant women) would sleep under insecticide treated nets and have access to effective treatment.

### **THE VISION**

AMMREN's focus is on disseminating accurate information on malaria control initiatives. It will also monitor and advocate the implementation of malaria policies in African countries and lobby policy makers to implement international agreements.

The network's top priority will be training journalists to report effectively on malaria. This will develop in the long-term into a Malaria Media Institute, to be hosted by Women, Media and Change.

Membership of the network is open to African journalists interested in reporting on malaria. Scientists, malaria experts and community health workers can become associate members.

## **MISSION**

AMMREN will contribute to the control of malaria by positively influencing the attitudes and behaviour of African communities and decision-makers.

## **OBJECTIVES**

- To disseminate accurate information on malaria control and treatment
- To promote sharing of research findings between journalists and scientists
- To monitor implementation of malaria policies
- To lobby policymakers to fast track international agreements on malaria control

## **STRUCTURE**

There are two levels of membership in AMMREN. Core membership is open to interested African journalists and Associate membership is open to scientists working in the field of malaria, researchers and donors.

WOMECA will be the official host of AMMREN, and will appoint an administrative coordinator who will pull together all the strings necessary to ensure the smooth operations of the network. The coordinator need not be a journalist but must have management qualifications and at least three years experience in a busy office.

INDEPTH will nominate a liaison officer at headquarters to ensure smooth and regular communication between AMMREN and the scientists.

There will be an editor, whose task will be to manage the professional end of things. She or he need not necessarily be resident in Ghana as AMMREN will be essentially an electronic

communication forum. She or he must have postgraduate qualifications in journalism and at least five years experience managing a wide and diverse team of journalists. Training experience will be essential. Cross-media experience and a second language — French/Portuguese — will be useful.

There will be at least two members in each country, one electronic and the other print, initially starting with communication in English and scaling up to French and Portuguese in the long term. The journalists must be at mid-career level and hold a university degree and/or professional qualifications.

Journalists will be attached to specific technical experts in each country, who will serve as their link to what's happening internationally and locally. This will ensure accurate and up-to-date information flow.

## **ACTIVITIES**

AMMREN's objectives will be executed by the following means:

**Media Presence:** Members are expected to write articles to be posted on the network's website and also published in national media in both electronic and print format on a regular basis —at least twice a month perhaps. These will take the form of investigative stories, news features, news analysis and opinion/commentary. Funds allowing, a special edition of "Malaria in Africa" will be published in hard copy and distributed in member countries on Africa Malaria Day.

There will be a forum for continuing conversations on the web, which will cut both ways — between journalists and journalists and between scientists and journalists — to ensure cross pollination between both sets of professionals.

**Training/Networking:** It is envisaged that two intensive training sessions, organised on a thematic basis, will be held annually. These sessions will bring together journalists and scientists in a thorough exploration of developments in a given area — malaria in children, for example — and journalists will get direction on the specific story possibilities on a country-by-country basis. Subsequent articles are expected to be published in the host media organisation represented at the workshop; with the possibility of being published in report/book form should funds allow it. The second level of journalistic skills development will be an ongoing activity, via either the internet or an intranet that enables writers to compare notes and to seek direction.

**Award scheme:** Taking advantage of anniversaries such as Africa Malaria Day on April 25, AMMREN will invite applications from a broad cross-section of African journalists for print and electronic presentations that must have been published end of February of the award year. The closing date for sending them will be March 25 to allow the panel of judges to review and compare notes.

It is proposed that there are three categories, with winners and two runners-up. The categories will be Best Investigative Story; Best Human Interest Story; and the last one for Best Campaign. Judges should be high level editors and top malaria researchers who will gauge the level of journalistic excellence alongside understanding of the technical issues arising in malaria.

**Lobbying:**

In pursuit of AMMREN's expressed desire to influence change within communities and among national decision-makers, it is proposed that members engage in annual campaigns targeting specific themes. This should be driven by research findings generated by the scientists, and the challenge would be for journalists to package this information in a gripping and

captivating way cutting across the different media platforms. Ideally, the campaign should be carried throughout the member countries to create an impact.

## **GENERAL OBSERVATIONS**

One of the key challenges to come out of the Accra workshop was how to use the information to step up the campaign against malaria in Africa. In conversations extending out of the workshop venue, participants debated why malaria has not received the kind of attention that HIV/AIDS has — even with high profile campaigns such as Roll Back Malaria.

The answer probably lies in the drama of the onset of HIV/AIDS and the controversies it has generated over time. Malaria has been with us for a long time and, in Africa, it has simply become a way of life — albeit one that cuts down children and adults with depressing regularity.

Yet malaria poses a huge threat to children under five and the disease burden hugely affects the production capacities of adults across the board. An inordinate number of Africans die not because of what they have done, but because of where they have been born. Yet, it is arguably easier to deal with malaria than the HIV/Aids crisis.

AMMREN is an idea whose time has come. It is disheartening that a disease that has wreaked so much havoc in Africa should be allowed to continue afflicting this continent at a time when there is so much work being done and so much information readily available. This was amply demonstrated at the Accra workshop, where the constant refrain became: “How can we get the right information out to the people who need it?”

This missing link is effective communication, and it is this gap that AMMREN seeks to close. Our assessment of the situation is that it

is not only the general population in Africa that is affected by the lack of fresh and accurate information. Even community health workers appear to be on shaky ground when it comes to identifying the proper ways and means of preventing, controlling and treating malaria.

In a world in which health matters are clouded by myths and information packaged in technical and inaccessible language, the media have a responsibility to engage in development communication. We are called upon to go beyond the hit-and-run nature of news reporting and become key players in changing the image of Africa as a washed out tale of misery, hunger, suffering and disease.

For a long time, science has been perceived as a tough nut to crack, and many journalists have given up in the face of highly technical information packaged in the form of jargon that makes sense only to specialists. Yet the Accra workshop clearly demonstrated that it is possible to step down even the most intricate scientific findings and explanations to ordinary “English” that opens up a whole new world of opportunities to communicating across the board.

The Accra workshop was, thus, an eye opener in more ways than one. The level of debate and engagement was of a high calibre and this could be discerned even in journalists whose first working language is not English.

AMMREN is a partnership between those who generate information and those who have the skills and the means to ensure the right information gets into the right hands at the right time. It is about journalists and scientists working hand in hand for a healthier and better tomorrow. Together we can do it!

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