

## Short- and Long-term impacts of COVID-19 on communities affected by NTDs (including impacts on vulnerable communities and community perceptions of COVID-19)

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The [COUNTDOWN](#) partners and researchers meeting held virtually on May 5<sup>th</sup>, 2020 was a forum where researchers and partners from Cameroon, Ghana, Liberia, Nigeria, the US and UK met to share challenges and experiences during the current COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on neglected tropical diseases (NTDs) research and implementation.

A key theme that ran through the discussion was around the impact the virus is having on communities. Communities affected by NTDs are characteristically more marginalised without adequate access to Water, Hygiene and sanitation (WASH) and limited access to health care in struggling health systems. On the 1st April 2020, the World Health Organisation (WHO) release interim guidance to propose that **'community-based surveys, active case-finding activities and mass treatment campaigns for neglected tropical diseases be postponed until further notice'** (WHO 2020a) in order to comply with physical and social distancing preventative measures widely adopted.

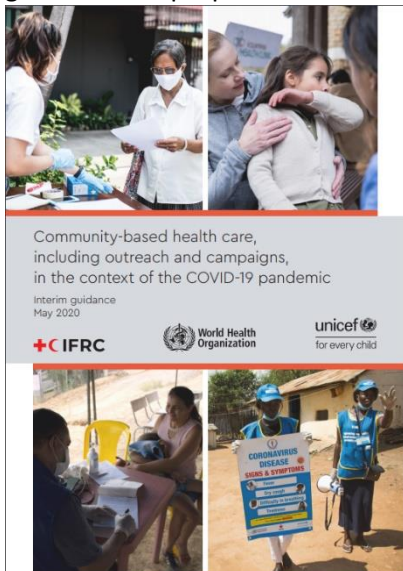


Photo credit: (WHO, 2020a)

However, despite recommendation for some essential NTD services to continue, these services too may have been compromised. The emergence of COVID-19 has diverted attention from the already neglected tropical diseases, with supply chains prioritized for COVID-19, NTD health workers redeployed to work for COVID-19 related interventions, ongoing routine COVID-19 interventions carried out with fear due to the lack of personal protective equipment (PPE), and the general imposed lockdown that has led to the many NTD-related interventions to halt. These are likely to cause both short- and long-term impacts which need further evaluation.

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Across COUNTDOWN partner countries, **communities are experiencing a breakdown of treatment cycles and mass drug administration (MDA) campaigns**. Without treatment, there could potentially be an increase in disease progression and transmissions. The depth and severity of potential increase in prevalence of NTDs is currently being evaluated through mathematical modelling (WHO 2020b) and the longer- term implications for NTD elimination and control is currently unclear (Molyneux 2020). COVID-19 related interventions have been prioritized across communities in COUNTDOWN partner countries: in Liberia, Buruli testing facilities have had to make way for COVID-19 testing; the research team in Ghana are supporting the response through offering their laboratory for COVID-19 testing in collaboration with the national testing centre; and supply chains for health facilities focus on COVID-19 related interventions. With these, routine diagnostic investigations for NTDs are likely to reduce considerably and may break the chain of early diagnosis and treatment which significantly prevents long-term impairments from some NTDs (Picado et al 2019).

**Trust is known to be fundamental in the success of community-based public health programmes like MDA**, and therefore strategies to mitigate these challenges and strengthen relationships need to be

considered. Denial or misunderstandings about COVID 19 may lead to increased distrust between communities and health providers, as well as the potential to perpetuate stigma and marginalisation within the communities. Partners in Liberia and Cameroon expressed concern that denial or misunderstandings of COVID-19 would result in people not adhering to public health advice around COVID-19 prevention strategies and may also impact community-based programmes like MDA when they resume. Liberia colleagues especially reflected that distrust and denial also happened during and after the recent Ebola crisis, whilst Cameroon colleagues reflected that it is especially hard for communities to accept that their neighbours died from COVID-19 if they had not been able to be tested and had a confirmed diagnosis.

Stigma from COVID-19 may also perpetuate cycles of denial and mistrust. In a recent BBC World News broadcast, COUNTDOWN's colleague Professor Margaret Gyapong expressed concern how public health messages around COVID-19 are generating stigma for people affected by COVID-19 in Ghana. Professor Gyapong highlighted that we need to have continuous engagement, a multi-sectoral approach and health education to discuss beliefs and misconceptions around the disease, otherwise this will lead to delays in seeking healthcare for symptoms. These strategies are also being advocated by WHO through guidance on community engagement, such as [Community based health care including outreach and campaigns in the context of COVID 19 pandemic](#) (WHO, 2020a) and [IEC material which addresses common misconceptions](#) (WHO 2020c). To be successful, community engagement must reach those most vulnerable and neglected, therefore must engage with community structures and stakeholders which have the capacity to reach those often missed.

**Community health workers (CHWs) and community drug distributors (CDDs) have been key players in the control and management of NTDs.** These are members of the community that undergo short trainings to support health promotion and basic treatment activities within their communities, serving as a link between the health system and community members. For NTDs, CHWs and CDDs sensitize populations, follow-up patients and dispense medicines during campaigns. In Cameroon, CHWs and CDDs now focus on community sensitization on COVID-19 which may support public health communication and health seeking behaviour, however without ongoing sensitisation around NTDs, community awareness about NTDs may change after the pandemic, although messaging around hand hygiene and collaborations with WASH, may in fact have a potentially positive impact on reducing transmission of some NTDS, such as Soil Transmitted Helminths (STH).



Photo credit: COUNTDOWN Nigeria team

**Lockdown and social distances can cause physical and psychosocial breakdown, as well as increase poverty for those that are already marginalised.** Partners in Ghana expressed their desire to evaluate COVID-19's impact on livelihoods within communities, and how this may be impacting health seeking behaviour. NTDs including Onchocerciasis, Schistosomiasis, Lymphatic Filariasis, just to name a few, are already associated with stigma. People with such NTDs require social support from friends and relatives, but the emergence of COVID-19 prevents such interactions which might aggravate or instigate mental health issues.

**NTD programmes need further guidance and mitigation strategies to re-start community based NTD programmes such as MDA, school-based deworming and case management safely for both**

**CHWs/CDDs and community members**, which take into account the short and long-term impacts that COVID-19 is likely to have on communities affected by NTDs, including increased economic hardship and potentially poorer physical and mental health. Positive collaborations with other sectors such as WASH/increased hand hygiene messaging need to be sustained and strengthened, and community engagement/ effective communication needs to be ongoing to support trust in the health system and dispel misbeliefs.

### **References**

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### **Suggested Reading**

Van Bortel. T, Basnayake. A, Wurie. F, Jambai. M, Sultan Koroma. Muana. A, Hann. K, Eaton. J, Martina. S, & Nellumsa. L. (2016) *Psychosocial effects of an Ebola outbreak at individual, community and international level*. *Bulletin of the World Health Organization*; 94:210-214. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.2471/BLT.15.158543>