

COUNTDOWN reflects on Key Learnings from four years of supporting NTD activities in Liberia

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Almost four years after the [COUNTDOWN](#) project kicked off in Liberia, we reflect on achievements and challenges to date and look ahead to the future.

Project inception

At the COUNTDOWN Liberia inception meeting in Monrovia in August 2016, existing gaps and challenges associated with Neglected Tropical Diseases (NTDs) were identified. Representatives at the meeting included national and county NTD program staff, Non-Governmental Development Organizations (NGDOs) and academic representatives from the ministries of Education and Agriculture.

Collectively, stakeholders prioritized programmatic challenges to shape subsequent implementation research objectives: To increase [community ownership of Mass Drug Administration \(MDA\)](#); to [understand health workforce experience of NTD program delivery](#) with focus on training, supervision, incentives and implications for program sustainability; and to understand [constraints to the co-implementation and integration of the NTD program](#) with other health system activities.

The subsequent implementation research projects were conducted in districts in Bong and Maryland counties where there is high endemicity of priority preventive chemotherapy NTDs. Representatives from all sectors of the



Validation and dissemination meeting with a group of men in Garmu, Bong County

health system, community, county and national levels participated in the research process. Data collection methods included key Informant Interviews (KIIs) with NTD staff and heads of programs at national and county levels; life and job history information from Community Health Workers and Community Drug Distributors (CDDs); and the use of participatory approaches with individuals and households. The findings were validated and disseminated using innovative visual methods. Throughout all phases of the COUNTDOWN Liberia research health systems actors, including NTD program implementers were involved in learning and reflection processes to ensure findings were of program relevance.

Outcomes and achievements

One of the key achievements of the COUNTDOWN project in Liberia has been identifying key bottlenecks to NTD program delivery to inform the participatory design of health systems interventions that are currently being piloted. More can be read about these in a recent COUNTDOWN [blog post](#). The findings of the research will be utilized in developing strategies for equitable, effective and efficient NTD program delivery, to increase therapeutic coverage in fulfillment of WHO targets on specific NTD diseases as well as ensuring reduced morbidity for women and girls living with female genital schistosomiasis.

In 2019, Liberia's first [NTD communication strategy document](#) was developed in partnership with the Ministry of Health, Republic of Liberia to increase awareness around NTDs and to serve as a guide to NTD program implementation in Liberia.

Capacity strengthening has been a key factor for COUNTDOWN Liberia with a great deal of training and mentorship taking place within the research team, including training in quantitative and qualitative data analysis, problem tree analysis and evidence-based reporting plus paper writing workshops. These trainings enhance the researchers' abilities to provide evidence generated from the research findings.

Due to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting halts on project activities, learning and growing has become more of a focus in recent months. The research team will be taking part in a series of interactive COUNTDOWN Digital Engagement webinars over the coming weeks to strengthen skills in blogging, PowerPoint presentation and social media activity. This links in with the [COUNTDOWN cross-country blog series](#) which has just begun- the team will collaborate with colleagues in other partner countries to produce blog posts as part of this series, which will focus on the impacts of COVID-19.

Capacity strengthening activities have had a very positive impact within the Liberia research team, with people reporting increased confidence in their work and in their ability to have more input into the research process. Most excitedly, the research team is taking forward new skills in data collection, analysis and dissemination that will impact the new project in a constructive way.

Challenges and solutions

One of the key challenges encountered was the complexity of collaborations when planning NTD activities. As there were various organizations and departments within the Ministry of Health involved, each with different backgrounds, expertise, priorities, and interests, it could sometimes take considerable time to agree and finalize the way forward on key issues. The group, however, decided to focus on NTDs as the bigger picture and used this mindset to address issues accordingly. A product of this successful collaboration is the development of the aforementioned Liberia NTD Communication Strategy.

Another difficulty the research team in Liberia faced was access to research participants/stakeholders with the correct timing. A definite timeline for MDA could not always be communicated until last minute and as some of the data collection procedures required the Research Team to observe the MDA process by following and asking the CDDs key research questions, this created a challenge to the research team in gathering key information related to the project objectives. Furthermore, there were sometimes delays in scheduling appointments with relevant stakeholders/research participants at county and district level due to the need to communicate via specific channels within the Ministry of Health. The research teams mitigated these challenges by liaising with the relevant authorities at the national, county and community levels who supported them to obtain the data.

A final word from Alice Perkins, Research Manager

“The most enjoyable aspect so far of being a part of COUNTDOWN Liberia has been the collaboration with others. People empower and strengthen you and developing a team-building spirit is invaluable. Throughout working on COUNTDOWN Liberia, I have particularly appreciated the networking and the training opportunities. I am excited about taking forward what we have learned- collaborating with the Ministry of Health and the NTD program to address the bottlenecks and gaps identified with MDA and MTD program delivery to support equitable increase in therapeutic coverage of MDA in order to reduce morbidity, mortality and poverty associated with NTDs.”