

COUNTDOWN Launched in Nigeria!



If you want to go fast, go alone; if you want to go far, go together: Collaboration in Research

by Pamela Bongkiyung, Professor Russell Stothard & COUNTDOWN Nigeria Team

The COUNTDOWN programme was launched in Lagos – Nigeria, during the 18th Neglected Tropical Diseases (NTDs) Steering Committee Meeting, which took place from the 13th – 15th March 2017.

The Steering Committee gathered experts from the academia, the Federal Ministry of Health, the State Ministries of Health, Research Triangle Institute (RTI)/ENVISION, Evidence Action, End Fund, MITOSATH (Mission to Save the Helpless), Helen Keller International, Health Partners International, Sightsavers, HANDS (Health and Development Support Programme), Amen Health Foundation, NIMR (Nigerian Institute of Medical Research), WHO (World Health Organisation), eHealth Africa and COUNTDOWN of course.

The sub-committees which presented at the main steering committee meeting, ranged from research, technical review, NTDs- WASH (water, sanitation & hygiene), elimination & verification to advocacy & resource mobilization. Discussions had in the meeting ranged from donor priorities to country's needs. Should the country accept funders choice of disease even if the burden was heavier elsewhere; was one of the questions pondered.

With an introductory presentation from COUNTDOWN's Nigeria Country Director, Dr Sunday Isiyaku, the Steering Committee soon understood that the project's focus is to leave no one behind given its multidisciplinary approach and incorporation of health economics. Dr Isiyaku highlighted COUNTDOWN's implementation research that will investigate cost-effective ways of up-scaling NTD control. Not forgetting the pertinent role played by community drug distributors (CDDs) and in this case, two CDDs from Kaduna state who have served for over 15 years; Dr Isiyaku, reminded the Steering Committee of what communities can achieve when they are committed as seen in the case of the dedicated CDDs from Kaduna.



Community Drug Distributors (L-R): Joseph Umaru & Shittu Baba

Dr Isiyaku tendered a request for the Research Sub – Committee of the NTD Steering Committee, to play an advisory role to the COUNTDOWN Nigeria project. This was endorsed by all chairs of the NTD Steering Committee.

COUNTDOWN's Director – Professor Russell Stothard, in his opening speech, informed the group that COUNTDOWN is not just about one disease or partner but a multitude of partnerships working together with a major task of breaching the gap between researchers and policymakers at the federal, state and international levels.

COUNTDOWN's priority in Nigeria is to conduct a situational analysis in the two focal states – Kaduna & Ogun, which should reveal the challenges that need to be addressed to cost-effectively scale-up NTD programmes and ease integration into the health system whilst strengthening it. In addition, gaps will be identified in line with successes that will form the basis for the next stage of the research.

The launch of COUNTDOWN Nigeria elucidated cheers but also injected an element of hope as shown in the enthusiasm expressed by Professor Adenike Abiose, Professor Uche Amazigo and Dr Margaret Mafe – all members of the NTD Steering Committee. COUNTDOWN Nigeria was touted as the programme that would breach the evidence research gap left by the end of APOC (African Programme for Onchocerciasis Control) as seen in its multi-partner and cross-border approach.

It soon became evident that there is a fervent desire within the Nigerian NTD community for collaboration and knowledge sharing in tackling hotspots of NTDs, an action already embodied by COUNTDOWN. In the Research Sub-Committee's recommendations to the Steering Committee, evidence-based research is encouraged in its terms of reference. It is no longer enough to produce endless research, evidence-based research is emphasised.

Activities are already being integrated at the federal, state, local government areas (LGAs) and community levels to include advocacy and resource mobilization. There is a push for this to be reflected in state NTD Master Plans to help fund NTD activities within the country. In East Africa, advocacy has a long tradition and is entrenched in most non-governmental

development organisations. Realisation is dawning on the need for advocacy to become civil society driven. The point is to encourage buy-in from communities and major stakeholders within Nigeria. For some programmes like UNITED Consortium for NTDs, engaging civil society organisations to be active participants for advocacy, provides a basis for their exit strategy.

Why advocate and mobilise for funds? We all know donors will not give forever and given the recent changing political climates and donor priorities in main funders' countries', the Nigerian NTD community are preparing themselves for when donor fatigue sets in.

By the time funds from advocacy and mobilisation activities in Nigeria stream in, we hope COUNTDOWN's implementation research can provide some solutions that will put the funds raised through advocacy, to good use and move the NTDs agenda that closer to elimination.

You can access the Storify of our tweets for the launch from [@NTDCOUNTDOWN](#) and [@COUNTDOWNNG](#) from [here](#).