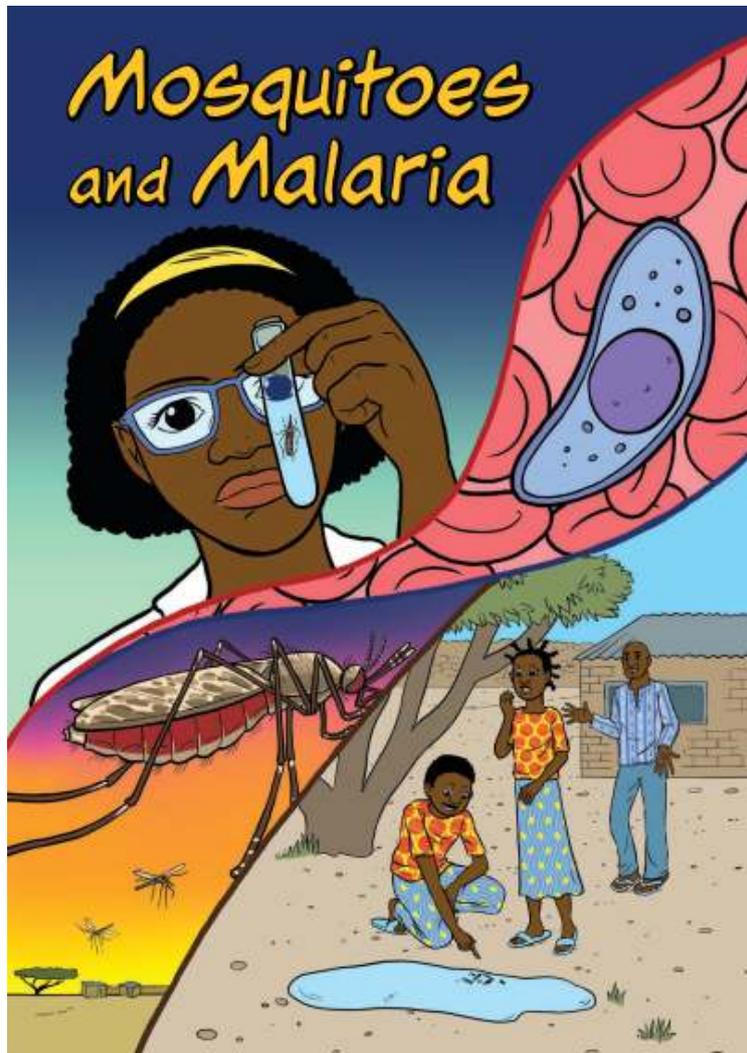


# Target Malaria's Community Stakeholder Management is an innovative African Contribution to Global Health



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## Target Malaria's community stakeholder management is an innovative African contribution to global health

In this essay, I want to answer the following question: is the process which Target Malaria has set up to engage local communities in their research innovative and an African contribution to global health?

First, I will define 'global health', 'African contribution' and 'innovation' for the purpose of this essay. Subsequently, I will argue that this project meets these criteria, and is therefore an innovative, African contribution to global health. Finally, I will give a short outlook, on how the rest of the world might benefit from this project.

Global health, for this essay, is a multidisciplinary scientific research field concerning problems relating to all aspects of health, which are influenced by factors on a global scale and are not limited to a country level, e.g., the COVID-19 pandemic is a good example. A contribution is African, if it takes place on the African continent and/or is predominantly developed by people originating from the African continent, and/or a specific African perspective is crucial to the contribution. What is a contribution to global health? As global health focuses on problems relating to health, a contribution in that area is (part of) a solution of a public health problem on a larger than national or regional scale.

Target Malaria is a university-based research program with a multidisciplinary team of researchers based in Africa, Europe, and North America. Research is mainly funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and by Open Philanthropy. The purpose of the research program is to control the existence of malaria, and the means are releasing genetically modified mosquitoes in different regions such as in Burkina Faso, Gabon and Mali.

Scientifically speaking the process is called Gene Drive and the purpose is reducing malaria by controlling the vector (Roberts and Thizy 2022:1). To be able to execute the research and release the mosquitoes, the permission of the relevant communities is crucial.

Malaria is a communicable disease, which manifests itself on all continents, except for Europe. As malaria is spread by mosquitoes (vectors), this health problem is not limited to one country, but exceeds national borders. Further, malaria is strongly influenced by inequities between the global North and the global South. There is a strong correlation between the strength of the economy, health care and education levels of countries and the

eradication of malaria. Therefore, malaria is a global health problem. Part of the research program of Target Malaria tries to establish an inclusive and positive way of working together with local communities. The local communities are stakeholders in the project, so this is part of stakeholder management. The development of a best practices model by Target Malaria for the involvement of local communities based on equality (Roberts and Thizy 2022:2) is part of a solution of the global health problem of malaria; while this strategy to work together will lessen inequities between local communities and research teams and will empower local communities. It will increase local communities' better understanding of the scientific proposal, and the research teams' understanding of the local communities' priorities. For instance, it was important to develop a common glossary in the local languages to talk about gene drive, gene modification, sterile mosquitoes and other terms scientists use (Chemonges Wanyama et al. 2021: 4). This will lead to a higher chance of success of the actual project, as both parties will be collaborating to further the goals of the program. Now that we have established that the stakeholder management of local communities by Target Malaria is part of the research field of global health, the question is whether it constitutes an African contribution.

African can refer to geography (location), the origin of the actors or a specific African perspective. Target Malaria is based in Ghana and operates in Burkina Faso, Gabon, and Mali. From the publications the background of the authors is not immediately clear. The researchers have been objectified, in the sense that their place of employment is mentioned, as always in scientific publications, but not their places of origin. The places of employment are located all over the world and for an important part in Africa. By looking up the researchers, it becomes obvious that an important part of the researchers is from Africa, and the first authors are mostly from, and based, in Africa. The research by Target Malaria is done in Africa, and led, or impacted for an important part, by African researchers, and therefore an African contribution. Moreover, this specific project has gone further and consciously incorporated an African perspective. Two examples of including an African perspective are, first of all the involvement of an African theatre group, to explain the concepts to the local communities, and to integrate the feedback of the theatre group in the concept (Toe et al. 2022:4), and secondly, the structures in place in local communities have not been challenged, although an effort was made to include all groups, i.e. also women

(Roberts and Thizy 2022: 6). The African perspective for this project came to the foreground by taking ideas from local communities seriously, following up on them in the plays and the glossary, and by respecting the local structures and working with them. This emphasizes the research is an African contribution to global health.

The last question, which needs to be answered is, whether the project is an innovative contribution to global health. The project is a contribution to global health, if it advances this research field, and as the research field consists of global health problems, it needs to be (part of) a solution to one of these global health problems. Malaria is a global health problem, caused in part by inequities. The project from Target Malaria alleviates the knowledge and power inequity between the researchers and local communities for this specific project, and questions itself, with help from others, to improve the methods of communication, sharing of knowledge, and working together(Thizy 2021:2-4). Target Malaria goes even further with its aim to formulate ethical principles with the purpose to develop a 'best practice' model. These principles are:

1. "Prioritize engagement with the most ethically relevant groups;
2. Conduct engagement with these groups in the spirit and form of co-development;
3. Engagement should be conducted by representatives of the research project;
4. Begin engagement early, engage continuously, and iterate often" (Roberts and Thizy 2022:9).

These principles have far-reaching consequences and are innovative. Researchers engaging in this manner must reprioritize their budget, their time, and their timelines. Target Malaria did just that. They involved local communities at a very early stage and kept engaging with them all through the project. This impacted milestones and furthered the wish of the researchers to formulate a new best practice for these types of trials. The purpose of formulating a new best practice is to shorten timelines for the next time and comparable trials by providing a usable model. Another decision which was taken was to allocate resources in such a way, that money and time reserved for stakeholder management was not spent on the funders of the project, but instead on local communities. To create an innovative model for best practice, while alleviating inequity, based on a wish for respectful and equal communications, is in my opinion a contribution to global health.

Despite of the development of this contribution to global health, Target Malaria has still room for improvements. The comic which is published on the website of Target Malaria would benefit from this process, based on the principles as described above, as well. The story is informative, but lacks an exciting storyline, like the play did at first. Furthermore, the scientist is white and everybody else is black, which seems a missed opportunity (Imperial College London 2019). There are African scientists working on the project as well as white people, and the project is targeted to train local people. This warrants the people populating the comic to represent the local community only. Role models are important.

In my opinion, the newly developed form of stakeholder management for local communities by Target Malaria is an African contribution to global health. It is a contribution which deserves to be promoted more broadly. The principles articulated for the community engagement could be used in many other settings as well. Especially, in those settings where there is large asymmetries regarding knowledge, power, and economic background between researchers and a specific community. The model could be used and adapted for other types of research as well, like anthropological or historical research.

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## Image

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