Leveraging data-driven approaches for malaria social and behaviour change programming in conflict-affected communities of the Southwest and Littoral regions of Cameroon

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Introduction

In conflict-affected remote communities of Cameroon, malaria prevention and treatment face significant challenges. With 30 percent of health facilities having closed due to instability, there is an increased reliance on community systems. The Breaking Barriers research project, funded by the 5% Initiative, sought to improve access to malaria prevention and control. Together with Reach Out, Kasafro and a variety of stakeholders, Malaria Consortium co-created a novel community engagement approach, the Community Health Participatory Approach (CoHPA), to bolster malaria prevention and health-seeking behaviour, emphasising community engagement and data-driven insights to optimise interventions.

Methods

- The Breaking Barriers research project employed formative, participatory research methods, including co-creation workshops, to develop the CoHPA.
- Trained community volunteers carried out monthly dialogues using a flipchart and guidance manual, in 80 communities in the Southwest and Littoral regions of Cameroon.
- Participants completed score-cards to evaluate the content of each meeting and the skills of the volunteers. The results collated from the scorecards informed targeted volunteer support and content refinement.
- Volunteer supervisors recorded the results and key community questions in a digital information system, allowing for continuous review, feedback and programme redesign.
- Community volunteers conducted 560 community dialogues from May to December 2022.

Results

- A total of 2,342 community members actively participated in CoHPA meetings. Average attendance was 24 participants per meeting, of whom 21 percent were internally displaced people and 13 percent were people who had returned to their original homes. Women comprised 58 percent of attendees.
- Participants completed 903 scorecards, which were used to identify volunteers in need of extra support and to suggest adaptations to the manual and flipchart.
- A traffic light system was used to classify the level of support required by communities, based on the regularity of meetings, attendance and implementation of an action plan. Due to insecurity and poor infrastructure challenges, 10 percent of communities were graded 'red'.
- Over 80 percent of participants were satisfied with facilitation skills, inclusion, the attitude of the community volunteers and participation.
- Weekly reviews of scorecard feedback led to improved CoHPA planning that enabled representation from sub-leads and key groups, and boosted the confidence of community volunteers; this led to an improvement in community score from 74 percent to 88 percent.

> **At first CoHPA seemed to be the same as other interventions, but [it] gives a greater chance to be closer to the community. The feedback component to community meetings is new. In each meeting, there is a reflection and a plan to follow up on activities.**
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> DCSO, Ekondo Tito

Conclusion

Data-driven insights from the CoHPA scorecard enabled the technical team to identify communities in need of greater engagement, further training needs and additional content for volunteer resources. This enhanced targeted and data-informed malaria social and behaviour change programming in conflict-affected regions of Cameroon.

Data-driven approaches enhance targeted malaria prevention in conflict-affected areas of Cameroon, optimising community engagement and volunteer resources

Lessons learnt

- Community engagement is essential for effective malaria prevention. Inclusive representation, participation and action ensure that all groups are reached.
- Community health workers play a pivotal role in the prevention of malaria, but insecurity, resource constraints (e.g. stock-outs) and poor motivation hinder their effectiveness.
- Early treatment is vital, but knowledge, cost and distance deter timely care-seeking for children.
- Community engagement methods such as dialogues are effective, but require motivated participants, especially in conflict-affected areas.
- Regular feedback mechanisms including scorecards, are instrumental in enhancing programme delivery and boosting volunteer confidence.
- Community leader presence in meetings significantly enhances engagement and effectiveness.
- Visual aids, such as flipcharts, can greatly improve participants' understanding and interaction during sessions.
- While manuals can be informative, their design and content should prioritise easy-to-understand information to avoid overwhelming participants.
- Action plans are crucial, but their success hinges on the availability of necessary resources.
- Continuous feedback and adaptability are key to refining and improving interventions.

Supplementary visuals

Photo 1: Mosquito net demonstration