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How media and communication are helping to tackle malaria in Sierra Leone

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Introduction

The estimated number of malaria cases and deaths in Sierra Leone decreased from 2010–2018.¹ Still, with an estimated 2.4 million cases in 2018,² malaria remains a serious public health risk in the country. In fact malaria is endemic in Sierra Leone, affecting all parts of the country. The entire population is at risk of the disease, but pregnant women and children under five years old are most affected – malaria is the leading cause of death for children under five.³

From October 2017 to February 2021, BBC Media Action ran a Communication for Healthy Behaviours, Achieving Reduced Malaria (CHARM) project funded by Comic Relief to contribute to better malaria control and increased demand for health services in Sierra Leone. This project primarily targeted women of childbearing age, their partners and other influential caregivers (such as grandmothers and aunts).

As part of this project, BBC Media Action broadcast a national radio magazine/discussion programme, *Tawa Fo Welbodi* (Determined For Health), as well as 15 radio & 15 TV public service announcements (PSAs) on radio, TV and social media. This media content covered topics including how malaria spreads, the importance of getting tested for malaria and how to protect yourself by sleeping under an insecticide-treated bed net.

BBC Media Action broadcast a national radio magazine/discussion programme, *Tawa Fo Welbodi* (Determined For Health) and PSAs on radio, TV and social media

During the second half of the project, BBC Media Action focused on greater accountability and transparency around malaria service delivery issues. Six town hall debate radio programmes were recorded in front of audiences in different districts of Sierra Leone, each with the help of a local radio station. The idea was to create a platform for communities and service providers to discuss issues affecting the delivery of malaria services and develop/agree on actions to address them. From October 2019, these programmes were broadcast within the existing *Tawa Fo Welbodi* broadcast schedule to increase audience engagement and understanding around malaria service delivery challenges and solutions. BBC Media Action also trained 15 partner radio stations across Sierra Leone to produce monthly local community discussion programmes designed to foster discussion, build relationships and provide local solutions to improve access to, and the quality of, malaria health services.

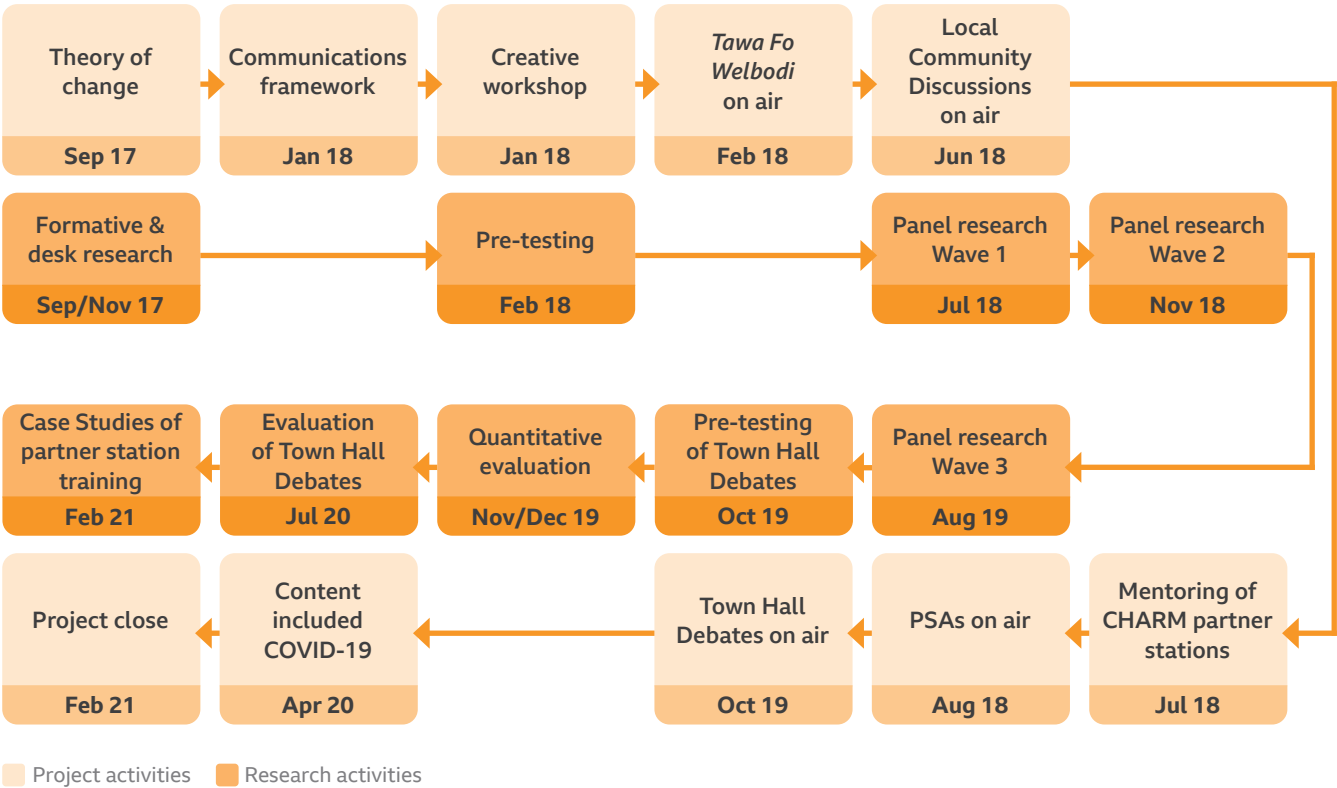
Through a series of examples, this report shows how the project's formative research informed its media content. It then assesses the impact of this content and highlights continued challenges and recommendations for further interventions focused on malaria in Sierra Leone.

¹ World Health Organization (2019) The World Malaria Report 2019, page 146

² Ibid.

³ NMCP, SSL, CRS, and ICF (2016) Sierra Leone Malaria Indicator Survey 2016. <https://dhsprogram.com/pubs/pdf/MIS25/MIS25.pdf>

Figure 1: Project timelines and components 2017–2021



The formative research for this project consisted of a literature review, 12 focus groups with members of the target audiences, and key informant interviews with health workers across Sierra Leone. This work looked at how malaria affects people’s lives. It found that malaria is often normalised in Sierra Leone – people can be complacent as they think malaria is a common disease that is part of their lives. As a result, some Sierra Leoneans do not use insecticide-treated bed nets properly, they treat suspected cases of malaria in their family with paracetamol and often do not think it is important to get a malaria test.

Members of the production team record a malaria discussion in Fogbo community in Western Area Urban



BBC Media Action used these findings to develop a project strategy and target audience profiles to guide the design of the radio show and subsequent PSAs. This media content was designed to encourage healthier behaviours around malaria, and to help audience members understand that malaria is a serious and potentially life threatening disease unless it is promptly diagnosed and treated by a health worker. The project team pre-tested the content before broadcast, to understand how it resonated with target audiences.

In July 2018, November/December 2018 and August 2019 the project team set up a panel of 40 families from across Sierra Leone who listened to *Tawa Fo Welbodi*. This was to measure change in people's knowledge, attitudes and practices around malaria over time⁴ and to provide feedback to guide programme adaptations.

To evaluate the programming, the project team conducted a nationally representative, face-to-face survey with 3,000 respondents in November and December 2019. This explored the reach, engagement and impact of *Tawa Fo Welbodi*, the project PSAs and additional media outputs in improving key malaria-related health behaviours in Sierra Leone. This was followed by qualitative research to evaluate the project's town hall debate programmes and to understand people's knowledge and attitudes in relation to COVID-19.

⁴ A nationwide quantitative study comprised 3,090 face-to-face household interviews. Analysis compared results from people reached by *Tawa Fo Welbodi* and the PSAs and people not reached by those programmes on key outcomes such as knowledge, attitudes and confidence. This included statistical analysis to estimate the likelihood of an outcome, when controlling for factors such as age, gender, education level, income and location.

Research findings

Who listened to *Tawa Fo Welbodi* radio programme and the PSAs?

- *Tawa Fo Welbodi* reached⁵ 2.1 million people (**51% of Sierra Leone's adult population**). Its audience was 55% male and 45% female, reflecting the country's male-dominated weekly radio listenership (81% of males and 71% females).
- 38% of the population were regular listeners (listening to at least every other episode, approximately 1.6 million people). Loyalty to the programme was high with 74% of those reached being regular listeners. Regular listeners were again slightly more male (57%) than female (43%).
- *Tawa Fo Welbodi* reached a broad spectrum of people, including those living in rural areas and those with low levels of education and income.
- **The PSAs reached 37% of the adult population.** People who were regularly exposed to the PSAs (watched or listened to 3–12 PSAs) were 55% male and 45% female. Most people heard the PSAs on the radio (35%). Lower proportions saw them on TV (8%) and Facebook (3%), likely reflecting Sierra Leoneans' levels of access to these platforms.

The qualitative panel found that listeners thought the project's media content was educational and informative, helping them to learn how to protect themselves and their families from malaria. People found the content engaging and entertaining, especially the use of music in *Tawa Fo Welbodi* and comedy in the PSAs to convey health information. They found expert contributions, such as from doctors and health workers, particularly useful in providing trusted health information.

The following examples take different themes, and for each illustrate key insights from the formative and panel research, and how these informed the development of *Tawa Fo Welbodi*, the PSAs and other project outputs. These insights helped the production team to address specific issues and barriers around positive health behaviour in relation to malaria, and how to engage audiences effectively. They also capture the impact of *Tawa Fo Welbodi* and PSAs, and outline recommendations for future media projects in relation to malaria in Sierra Leone.



⁵ "Reached" is defined as people who listened to at least one *Tawa Fo Welbodi* programme within the preceding 12 months.

Enabling families to prevent malaria

Research insight

Many people who had bed nets did not sleep under them every night.

- Bed nets are too hot and uncomfortable.

“I get upset or I could not breathe very well, I... just have a feeling that I am in a very sealed place.”

Male, Bo, rural

- Bed nets are used for other things e.g. fishing nets or not used if torn or old.

Project approach

Use of familiar and humorous characters and role models.

- Feature an engaging keke (taxi driver) in a PSA to discuss how using a bed net can give you ‘sweet dreams’, after his friend was troubled by mosquitoes.

- Provide information on how to use, repair and hang nets outside.

- Feature couples discussing plans to protect themselves from malaria.

What impact did this have?

- Regular listeners of *Tawa Fo Welbodi* were **1.4 times more likely** than non listeners to say that it is very important to sleep under an insecticide-treated bed net.⁶

- One-third (32%) of regular listeners said they had discussed *Tawa Fo Welbodi* with someone.

“It [was] through your programme – my husband was not the person that likes to sleep inside [a] bed net [and] was getting frequent attacks of malaria. Since [listening to Tawa Fo Welbodi] I never allowed him to sleep without a bed net.”

Female, *Tawa Fo Welbodi* listener, Western Area, urban

- People learned about how to hang bed nets outside to allow chemicals to diffuse; how to tuck bed nets into mattresses and how to mend torn nets.

Continued challenges

- 28% of respondents said they had no bed nets in household.
- A further 36% did not have enough bed nets for every member of their household.

Next steps

- Media to play an accountability role to ensure effective roll out of bed nets.
- Media campaigns needed to inform people on how to look after bed nets.

⁶ Regression analysis compared the responses of regular listeners with non-listeners while controlling for other influential factors such as age, gender, income, education level and location.

Helping couples and caregivers seek clinical testing for suspected malaria

Research insight

People lacked understanding around why prompt testing for malaria is important.

- Health workers said that mothers leave it too late to take their children for malaria testing.

“They will be at home treating the children on their own without any diagnostic. By the time they come to the hospital, the child is already anaemic and in a very difficult condition.”

Nurse, Kenema, rural

- People commonly believed they know if they have malaria (self-diagnosis) and get medicine from a pharmacy (self-treat).

Project approach

Sharing personal stories to encourage emotional connections.

- Personal stories and testimonials to trigger empathy.
- Emphasize that malaria is a serious disease that can be life-threatening if not diagnose withing 24 hours.
- Show risks of self-diagnosing and delaying testing.
- Build awareness that malaria tests are free and people diagnosed can get free treatment.

What impact did this have?

- Regular listeners of *Tawa Fo Welbodi* were more likely than non listeners to say it is very important to test for malaria.⁷

“Because the test will help you to know if it is malaria or not, that will determine which treatment you should take.”

Female, *Tawa Fo Welbodi* listener, Kenema, urban

“Before, [I delayed going] to hospital when I was feeling sick. But since I started listening to this programme, I don’t waste time in going to the hospital the moment I start feeling sick.”

Female caregiver, *Tawa Fo Welbodi* listener, Kenema, rural

Continued challenges

- Some people still fear they will have to pay for a malaria test.
- People report that health centres do not have enough test kits.
- People feared that going to hospital for a malaria test might result in getting a COVID-19 test or being misdiagnosed with COVID-19.

Next steps

- Media and communication can play a role in clarifying misunderstanding around COVID-19 and provide health workers with skills and knowledge to take appropriate action if people have symptoms for either disease.

⁷ Regression analysis compared the responses of regular listeners with non-listeners while controlling for other influential factors such as age, gender, income, education level and location.

Inspiring couples and caregivers to take and complete malaria treatment

Research insight	Project approach
<p>People often treated and managed malaria themselves or did not complete their malaria treatment.</p> <p><i>“The immediate thing I would do is buy paracetamol... After three days, if [symptoms] do not improve, I will take the person to the hospital.”</i></p> <p>Male, Bo, rural</p>	<p>Help audiences understand the importance of following recommended dosage and completing malaria treatment.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• On-location interviews with health experts who provided trusted information.• Personal stories from people who had tried to self-treat malaria with negative consequences
What impact did this have?	
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Four-fifths (79%) of people exposed to <i>Tawa Fo Welbodi</i> or the PSAs said it was “very important” to treat malaria with recommended medication compared to 71% of not exposed. <p><i>“According to the radio programme, if you do not complete your dosage as prescribed by the nurses/doctor, the parasite will not die, and the sick[ness] will attack you again.”</i></p> <p>Male <i>Tawa Fo Welbodi</i> listener, Bo, rural</p>	
Continued challenges	Next steps
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Research participants often reported malaria medication shortages in hospitals and that health workers often give them prescriptions to use at pharmacies where they have to pay for drugs.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Media and communication should continue to expose any issues in health service delivery and continue working with community members and health workers to solve challenges such as the supply of antimalarial drugs.



A nurse in Kabala responds to questions from community people as part of the town hall debates

Encouraging families and communities to demand better health services

Research insight

A barrier to people going to a health facility is their perception of health services.

- People did not know that malaria tests and treatment are free at government health centres and hospitals.
- Some complained about the poor attitude of health workers towards patients, and that they were often asked for money.
- People reported that they did not receive adequate malaria medication from health centres. This was confirmed by health workers who cited shortages of malaria drugs.

“We mostly run out of quinine. When this happens I write a report, as I am doing now.”

Nurse, Kabumbeh Village, Bombali, rural

Project approach

Local community radio discussions and town hall debates to improve accountability and transparency around malaria services.

- Community discussions and town hall debate programmes to bring community members and malaria service providers together to discuss local malaria health service challenges and find solutions.
- Give community members the chance to express their views and concerns in their own language (Krio or Mende) and health providers an opportunity to respond.

What impact did this have?

- Regular listeners were **1.5 times more likely** to know they have a right to free malaria treatment than others.⁸
- Community members and health providers reported that the discussions helped build relationships and gave both groups a chance to ask questions and learn about the challenges.
 - Three quarters (**74%**) of listeners to *Tawa Fo Welbodi* ‘strongly agreed’ or ‘agreed’ that the programme ‘had helped lead to improvements in health services related to malaria treatment.

“The community discussions have contributed immensely because it is now established that we have a common ground where we meet on a monthly basis to improve on healthcare service delivery in the district. This has cemented our relationship incredibly.”

Male, Well Bodi Corner local community discussion, Moyamba, urban

Continued challenges

- Audience members continued to face challenges in accessing malaria health services. This included travelling long distances, drug and test shortages, poor patient service and lack of knowledge on how to report issues.

Next steps

- Future media programmes could continue to raise issues and discuss challenges with those responsible for malaria health service provision, to ensure that improvements are made.

⁸ Regression analysis compared the responses of regular listeners with non-listeners while controlling for other influential factors such as age, gender, income, education level and location.

A sound technician
records a town hall
debate in Kono district



Conclusion

Research was used through the lifecycle of this project and its media outputs, helping to increase their relevance, reach and impact. About half (51%) of adult Sierra Leoneans listened to *Tawa Fo Welbodi* and 35% of the adult population listened to the radio PSAs. Listeners stated that they found this content educational and informative, and that it helped them learn how to protect themselves and their families from malaria. Listeners trusted the information provided by *Tawa Fo Welbodi* and found the steps recommended by the programme easy to follow.

This evaluation suggests that the project's programmes and PSAs have been effective in reinforcing positive knowledge, attitudes and behaviour to help prevent, test and treat malaria in Sierra Leone. This is specifically evident around community members' attitudes towards the importance of sleeping inside a bed net every night, their knowledge of the importance of getting a test for suspected malaria within 24 hours, and the need to take the recommended dose and full course of malaria drugs.

The research also shows that *Tawa Fo Welbodi* and the project PSAs contributed to improving listeners' knowledge of their right to free malaria testing and free treatment after diagnosis. The local discussion programmes and town hall debates provided interactive platforms that gave people the opportunity to ask questions about malaria, and gave health service providers opportunities to respond and clarify issues as well discuss potential solutions.

About half (51%) of adult Sierra Leoneans listened to *Tawa Fo Welbodi* and 35% of the adult population listened to the radio PSAs

In April 2020, the World Health Organization warned that the COVID-19 pandemic could disrupt the progress of malaria programmes in sub-Saharan Africa.⁹ Research for this project found that some people in Sierra Leone did not want to visit health centres with suspected malaria for fear of being tested and diagnosed with COVID-19. Current media and communication initiatives should address this by providing direct guidance from health workers on going for malaria tests. The pressing needs to provide insecticide-treated nets, and access to diagnosis and antimalarial medicines, continue in this pandemic.

BBC Media Action's project in Sierra Leone has demonstrated the role that media and communication can play in reinforcing and strengthening supportive knowledge, attitudes and behaviours to help tackle malaria in several ways. By widely sharing engaging, relatable and trusted information, this project has increased community members' ability to prevent malaria infections, and to seek prompt testing and appropriate treatment if they or their family members become ill. By opening up opportunities for dialogue between community members and healthcare professionals, it has also contributed to improving the quality of health services and systems. Crucially, by clarifying key barriers to prevention and treatment, and demonstrating the efficacy of its approach through research findings, this project highlights how media initiatives can continue to help tackle malaria in Sierra Leone and potentially also in other contexts.

⁹ World Health Organization (2020) *WHO urges countries to move quickly to save lives from malaria in sub-Saharan Africa*. Statement (online), 23 April 2020.

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