

## Case Study in Unlikely Advocates: A Lesson from African Advocacy

By Meg L. DeRonghe, Senior Vice President, M+R Seattle

*M+R's Meg DeRonghe provides ongoing strategic counsel to help build national, regional and global-level support for the Malaria Control and Evaluation Partnership in Africa (MACEPA), an initiative of PATH. Prior to joining M+R, Meg served as the director of advocacy and communication for MACEPA.*

---

Building advocacy capacity for public health issues in Africa is humbling. The fact that very few professional advocates or advocacy organizations exist in Africa requires a return to advocacy's roots, namely the *grassroots*. And building the grassroots efficiently and strategically means engaging more than the usual suspects. On the following pages, I've described how identifying and cultivating unusual advocates and spokespeople in Africa is helping to create legitimacy around an ongoing malaria prevention campaign. But the lessons I've learned in Africa apply to any advocacy campaign anywhere; the best advocates are more likely to be found in the PTA than in the halls of government.

### Case in Point

Malaria is an infectious disease that kills between one and three million people each year, the majority of whom are young children in sub-Saharan Africa. An analysis of the malaria advocacy community in any sub-Saharan African country will turn up a limited number of "malaria advocates," and very few of those identified as advocates or advocacy organizations represent a grassroots constituency and the accompanying political power. Malaria has both no constituency *and* an entirely ubiquitous constituency. Those hardest hit are virtually voiceless—children under five and pregnant women. As a result, the death and suffering, not to mention the economic toll of the disease, is often overlooked as advocacy-worthy. Yet every family, every day, is impacted by malaria.

Instilling a renewed understanding of the impact of malaria in communities, its preventability and the possibility of its ultimate eradication can go a long way in energizing a malaria movement and pressuring decision-makers to commit to malaria control.

### But How?

Investing in Africa requires re-thinking the best advocacy voices. In order to concentrate efforts and resources, an advocacy campaign in Africa needs to look past the usual suspects to unlikely advocates and spokespeople, or, as I like to think of them, "**catalytic cohorts**." These are groups that, by virtue of their unique role in society, can influence whole segments of the population and be cultivated to become advocates who pressure policymakers to move an issue. So, whereas some of the more likely advocates in Africa might include traditional healers, Mothers' Unions or paramount chiefs (community leaders one might normally plan to engage), unusual suspects could be:

- Club football (soccer) team members;
- House music deejays;
- The local *kgotla* (traditional city council); or
- Other catalytic cohorts.

In Zambia, for example, community radio station journalists have become a force in the fight to eliminate malaria as a public health threat.

---

**The lesson here:**

**The best advocates are not always the usual suspects.**

**Go back to the basics, explore the possibilities and identify *catalytic cohorts*.**

---

Any advocacy campaign, from the Beltway to Botswana, can benefit from this reminder. *Catalytic* is the key to this strategy:

First, tap the community – who are people tuned in to? Who does the community respect, listen to and trust? Identify these voices, train them, give them the resources they need, and build in motivating factors that will keep them engaged and integrated into the larger campaign structure.

They can change the face of the issue by addressing two critical needs:

- 1) **Access to the grassroots:** The strategy provides advocacy training to a cadre of community members and motivates them to use those skills in a way that reaches their peers. Reaching communities through their own leaders, role models and neighbors increases the validity of the message, the likelihood of success and it creates communal accountability.
- 2) **New champions:** This investment provides the possibility of step-out spokespeople who can become powerful malaria advocates. For every cohort trained, if one passionate spokesperson emerges and is given further training and opportunities, the investment will produce a network of powerful advocates integrated into communities across the country. These advocates have the extra advantage of bringing to bear existing constituencies, adding to the potential for long-term political pressure to sustain commitment to an issue, like malaria control and prevention.

## **Take it Home**

No matter what or where your advocacy campaign is, reach for unusual suspects. The power your campaign needs may lie in the local soccer league, the managers of your local public radio stations or your local chapter of returned Peace Corps volunteers. They're more likely to be found in your local diner than your local ivory tower.