2023 CLA CASE COMPETITION

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Case Title:

Data Forward Decision-Making to Eliminate Lymphatic Filariasis in Haiti

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Organization:

RTI International

Summary:

In 2021, Haiti's Ministry of Public Health and Population (MSPP) alongside USAID's Act to End Neglected Tropical Diseases | East (Act |East) program was at an inflection point. Increasing unrest and the COVID-19 pandemic caused extended delays in activities designed to eliminate lymphatic filariasis (LF). Haiti had made great strides in this effort, with only 18 of 140 communes remaining at risk of LF. In these remaining communes, LF prevalence remained at high levels despite years of intervention.

Act | East, MSPP, and external partners chose to pivot by investing in a year of "data forward" activities. They focused on operations research, rigorously collected new population data, and assessed gender and social inclusion issues that might affect LF activities. This data was then collaboratively interpreted through a Pause and Reflect meeting, where the government and partners discussed evidence and suggested new adaptations to the LF elimination strategy. In 2022, Act | East implemented these adaptations and integrated new collaborating, learning and adapting (CLA) activities throughout the year to understand their efficacy. After action reviews, "data discovery" interpretation sessions, and secondary analyses of routine data were conducted to understand successes, challenges, and new adaptations that might be needed. To everyone's excitement, adapted activities overcame some key challenges described in the initial "data forward" activities. New challenges were also identified and discussed alongside evidence-based adaptations for 2023.

As a result, the culture of the LF community in Haiti has become more collaborative. CLA activities, which may have seemed secondary before, have become critical touch points for improvement on Act | East. The investment in this work will be critical to one day eliminating LF in Haiti.

1. **WHAT: What is the general context in which the case takes place? What organizational or development challenge(s) or opportunities prompted you to collaborate, learn, and/or adapt?**

Haiti's Ministry of Public Health and Population (MSPP) launched its Neglected Tropical Diseases (NTD) Control Program in 2001. At the time, the entire country was endemic for lymphatic filariasis (LF), with 11 million people at risk. LF can cause lymphedema, a painful swelling of the legs, and hydrocele, a swelling of the scrotum. To reduce prevalence of disease to a level at which transmission will cease without further interventions WHO recommends five rounds of mass drug administration (MDA) to at least 65% of the total population, usually through annual campaigns. Haiti has achieved great success since launching its NTD program, with 122 of 140 communes able to stop MDA for LF. While most of the country has experienced success, in 2021,18 communes continued to face challenges, despite receiving as many as 13 rounds of annual treatment. All of this is set within a challenging social and political environment in Haiti- continued political unrest has made residents weary of government interventions. Migration out of Haiti and within communes makes estimating accurate coverage difficult, both in terms of current population (denominators) and in tracking residence of those treated (numerators).
In 2021, 20 years after the launch of the program, the MSPP paused routine MDA to gather a stronger evidence base for next steps in implementation in the remaining communes. This "Data Forward Approach" leveraged enhanced monitoring and evaluation (M&E) data as well as small operations research studies to try to overcome the last mile challenges of eliminating LF in Haiti. After data was collected and analyzed, the MSPP convened commune leadership, WHO, and NGO partners for a Pause and Reflect meeting in which evidence-based adaptations were suggested to improve MDA. In the two MDA campaigns the integration of CLA has helped make progress towards stopping MDA and addressing continued challenges.

2. **What two CLA Sub-Components are most clearly reflected in your case?**

M&E for Learning

Pause & Reflect

3. **HOW: What steps did you take to apply CLA approaches to address the challenge or opportunity described above?**

In 2021, Haiti's national LF elimination program was at a crossroads. The program had made substantial progress, with MDA stopped in 122 communes. However, despite following standard program protocols and WHO recommendations, 18 communes remained endemic. The previous two years had also been operationally challenging, with political unrest and COVID-19 causing unexpected delays in activities. MSPP, with support from USAID's Act | East program, decided to pause activities to gather a stronger evidence base for next steps in implementation. MSPP collaborated with Act | East program implementing partner RTI International as well as with Women Influencing Health, Education, and Rule of Law (WI-HER) and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to build a rigorous evidence base for improving implementation. They prioritized implementing MDA in one commune, Milot, under an operations research study investigating the effectiveness of different drug distribution strategies. In addition, MSPP collected additional census data to improve understanding of population movement and accuracy of MDA coverage data, and conducted qualitative gender, equity, and social inclusion (GESI) assessments to identify additional barriers to MDA participation and better understand those who refused to participate. All activities were operationalized with support of department and commune level NTD focal points and Act | East. As this data was collected and analyzed, the MSPP, with Act | East support, began to organize a large-scale learning event to pause and reflect on the technical evidence and recent learnings. Sharing data between partners and stakeholders and making decisions based on the "big picture" was crucial for this approach. The National LF Pause and Reflect meeting, held in December 2021, virtually gathered important stakeholders within Haiti and across the global LF community to interpret data and validate recommended approaches. The meeting was a hands-on workshop with participatory discussion, prioritizing data interpretation and validating strategic operational adaptations. Recommended approaches were then discussed with commune NTD focal points, who drove the contextualization of the plan for implementation. The program implemented key recommendations from the Pause and Reflect in the 2022 MDA in 7 communes. MSPP intentionally integrated CLA into the steps post-MDA to understand whether the adaptations were effective. After action reviews were conducted by Act | East staff with commune leadership and internally with the program to identify challenges, successes, and areas for improvement. Secondary analyses of real-time electronically collected treatment data were conducted and a household coverage evaluation survey validated coverage data and program reach, including understanding the reach of new social mobilization approaches. These data were shared by Act | East staff and discussed collaboratively with the MSPP as a team. The MDA strengthening adaptations introduced during the 2022 MDA were largely able to improve community mobilization and helped improve understanding of actual coverage in communes. During the post-MDA learning and reflection activities, new questions and recommendations arose. Successful strategies were selected to continue or expand to additional communes, such as GESI behavior change activities targeted to individuals refusing treatment or providing snacks alongside drug distribution. Challenges during implementation, such as insufficient training for social mobilization supervisors or issues, were discussed to identify what did not work well and recommend improvements. Adaptations resulting from these learnings were proposed and will be implemented and tested in the next MDA round.This process of continuous learning and adaptation has been coined the "Data Forward Approach." Using CLA principles, each annual round of MDA implementation intentionally gathers learning from experiences, M&E, and research to evaluate the strategic approach. The investment in CLA continues to support evidence-based adaptations in the activities of the Haiti LF program as they continue efforts to eliminate this disease.

4. RESULTS: Choose one of the following questions to answer.

We know you may have answers in mind for both questions; However please choose one to highlight as part of this case story

B. ORGANIZATIONAL EFFECTIVENESS

The intentional integration of CLA into Act | East and the LF program in Haiti has reinvigorated a shared commitment to tackle the most pressing challenges in these remaining 18 endemic communes. It has engaged a wider community of stakeholders who are aware of the challenges and are committed to ongoing sharing and learning to drive progress toward LF elimination in Haiti. Though perhaps a large investment of human resources and time in the first year, the rigorous data collected continues to pay dividends in driving programming to this day.

Since collaborating on the Haiti Pause and Reflect, learning activities are more integrated into the general planning process for MDA. Act | East Haiti staff plan after action reviews post-MDA with commune staff and come back to discuss challenges and successes with supporting Act | East staff from headquarters. M&E tools and data analysis are intentionally planned for the year with a focus on learning. An important shift is the focus on collaborative interpretations of M&E data as well as its intentional dissemination to communes during MDA planning meetings and microplanning. Rather than data being analyzed and reviewed by only one department or disseminated piecemeal, the Act | East Haiti team hosts “data discoveries” with key support staff, where analysis is discussed and initial ideas for adaptation are brainstormed collaboratively. These adaptations are then implemented at the country and commune level with their feedback incorporated.

External collaboration, Pause and Reflect, and M&E for learning continue to be at the heart of Act | East Haiti’s work two years after the initial “Data Forward Approach”. The success of this approach has taken off across the global program, with other Act | East supported countries adopting similar data-forward and CLA-focused methods to learn from and adapt their implementation. The culture of leveraging data for learning and reflecting with key stakeholders has been transformational and is currently well embedded into the program.

5. **ENABLING CONDITIONS: How have enabling conditions - resources (time/money/staff), organizational culture, or business/work processes - influenced your results? How would you advise others to navigate any challenges you may have faced?**

The initial shift and investment in a CLA based approach in Haiti in 2021 was a substantial change for Act | East and MSPP. The pressures of the difficult operating environment opened an avenue to reconsider the ultimate goals and needs of the program. Previously, most financial resources were allocated to implement MDA and surveys, leaving “extra” activities to be prioritized on an ad hoc basis. However, the political unrest, COVID-19, and the complicated nature of the remaining 18 communes necessitated a pause in routine activities. This pause, while an obstacle for normal program implementation, allowed for a reallocation of resources to address these evidence gaps, and necessitated increased external collaboration with research partners like the CDC. After implementing the “Data Forward Approach” and following Pause and Reflect, the Act | East Haiti team was asked to complete an after-action review by project leadership. This was not a standard operating procedure of the program; however, the Act | East Haiti team was eager to debrief on the MDA and the results of implementing adaptations generated during the P&R. This meeting was systematically documented, and the team was able to reference it again during MDA planning for the next year, and in conversations with the MSPP and external partners on learning. The ongoing use and usefulness of this information has created considerable buy-in for the continued investment in reflection meetings and created demand for similar discussions to interpret data on a regular basis.
Implementing CLA in Haiti has required an investment of resources and time which was not previously standard. This has been widely accepted by Act | East Haiti staff and the MSPP because of how useful the data, reflections, and collaboration has been. Others looking to learn from Act | East Haiti can see how large obstacles in implementation might be an opportunity to invest in new approaches, and how excitement to learn can lend itself to buy in for new approaches and processes.