



CIVIL SOCIETY FOR MALARIA ELIMINATION

Case study: The key role of Civil Society in the fight against malaria

Gabon : **Effective malaria advocacy**



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Email: contact@impactsante.org

Effective malaria advocacy in Gabon



Engaging in malaria requires strength. Alone you can go quickly, but together, we can go far. We all do different things and have different strengths, so working as a network allows us to work together and bring our strengths together.

Guy René Mombo, National Coordinator, RENAPSAJ, Gabon



Key take-aways :

- Effective advocacy requires engaging the community to identify and validate the problem, find a solution, and then dialogue, or “strong communication” to ensure that these solutions are respected.
- The media is a powerful ally that can help get messages through and influence decisions, and it is worth cultivating this relationship.
- CSOs working as a network will learn more and achieve more together, rather than working alone.

The National Network for Sexual Reproductive Health and Population Development, known by its French acronym, RENAPSAJ, is one of the best-established health networks in Gabon. Formed in 1997, it now has over 60 civil society organisation (CSOs) members. As malaria affects everyone in Gabon, eliminating it is part of RENAPSAJ's vision. Malaria is the number cause of treatment seeing in the country, and results in absenteeism from schools, and work, and remains a leading cause of mortality. RENAPSAJ works closely with the government to develop and implement the national malaria strategic plan, but this wasn't always the case.

“In the past, the national strategic plan used to just be written and we weren't involved. But as a result of our advocacy, we are now included.” Guy René Mombo, the National Coordinator of RENAPSAJ explained that through advocacy, the National Malaria Control Program invited the network to participate, who in turn, invited CSO to participate in developing the new plan. As a result of this, activities that are important to CSOs are now being included, particularly around social behaviour change communication, vector control, care for sick and ensuring that health insurance can cover all malaria-related costs, as well as community-led monitoring – the last two are advocacy efforts that are just beginning now. Guy sees civil society's role as important at two levels community and governance. At the community level, CSOs have a role to play in bringing information to ensure that people can recognise symptoms and seek a malaria test, as well as training community health workers on malaria. At the governance level, civil society needs to ensure that all resources are used effectively in line with the targets, and that this information in turn, is made available to the general public.

What is your approach to advocacy?

Guy shared four key steps to being successful in advocacy:

Step 1: Identify the problem through assessments involving community consultations. “These community consultations give us legitimacy”, Guy explained, as the information was coming from the people affected, and was seen as objective and based on people’s lived experience.

Step 2: Validate the problem through dialogue with the different stakeholders connected to the problem to ensure that the root of the problem has been identified and understood.

Step 3: Identify solutions through dialogue with the different stakeholders, ensuring that the solution will meet the communities needs and respond to their priorities.

Step 4: Communicate strongly. This step can look different depending on how much acceptance or resistance there is to the information that civil society brings to the table. Guy admitted that while they could influence some points, they had to concede or compromise on others. Where “strong” communication can be necessary is if agreements are not respected, which occurred during negotiations for a Global Fund request. Civil society had to go to the president of the Country Coordination Mechanism (CCM) and the Executive Director of the Global Fund to express its dissatisfaction with the follow up, and lack of inclusion of civil society’s contribution. “The most important thing is to find a solution. We discussed and we updated our agreement. We always start with dialogue, but sometimes it’s necessary to communicate more directly. In this case, we were able to help re-write concept note and our concerns were taken into account.” Guy noted that civil society benefited from support from the Global Fund’s Community, Rights and Gender (CRG) strategic initiative, and CS4ME to strengthen their advocacy skills. They also mobilised the media and used press conferences to engage more people in the campaign to address health issues that affect everyone. This included having former patients speak up about their own experiences, and therefore bring information to the Ministry of Health to help find a solution. This was used when there were treatment stock outs. “60-70% of time, our message gets through and we see impact.”

You have been successful in mobilising the media to bring attention to your efforts. How has this come about?

Civil society in Gabon enjoys a good relationship with the press, who are happy to share their stories. Guy admits that it’s not always easy, as you have to get them interested and present stories that the media will want to tell. RENAPSAJ has addressed this by providing training on different health issues, and human rights, which is an angle that the press is often interested in reporting on. “The media is a strategic partner, and it’s worth collaborating with them. We share our work with them, for example, updating them on the progress with the national strategic plan, and our call for government resources. We need to be sincere with them, and share information in real time. Sometimes we organise meetings with the directors to discuss issues. We are now preparing a partnership agreement to accompany us throughout the year as we follow resource mobilisation efforts for malaria. But it’s taken six or seven years to develop this relationship.” Guy also explained that working with the media can require ongoing negotiation and additional resources, especially if their travel costs need to be covered.

What advice do you have for other CSOs who want to influence government policies and plans?

Guy sees the first step as community consultations to ensure that you’re representing the community’s needs and priorities. And sometimes you need to work extra hard to ensure that voice is heard. He gave the example of working with the Ministry of Health on a Global Fund concept note. “At first, malaria wasn’t prioritised. We asked the community and shared the other issues, but the community said that malaria

was critical. So, we advocated to ensure that it was included. We mobilised the press, called witnesses, organised petitions, and sent letters, and these efforts ensured that malaria was included.” Advocacy needs to be done on a case-by-case basis, and different approaches may be needed each time. For example, to respond to COVID-19, civil society mobilised an alternative community group to build capacity to monitor funding in parallel with the government. Sometimes they monitor the government, and sometimes they work closely with them to try to secure additional resources for health centres. Having a close relationship with different health offices is important, and it means that they are more likely to be available to civil society, and be ready to negotiate. At other times, getting the job done requires being in constant contact with the community. Guy remembers going to a small community and meeting with a group there to discuss malaria. “The head of the community was so impacted by our work that he agreed to visit each household to repeat our key messages”.

Most importantly, Guy recommends that civil society needs to work as a collective, side-by-side with the community, with humility, in order to build critical mass. “Engaging in malaria requires strength. Alone you can go quickly, but together, we can go far. We all do different things and have different strengths, so working as a network allows us to work together and bring our strengths together.” Working as a network also allows all members to build their capacity, and maintain closer contact with the community, whose right to health is what we should all be striving towards.

This case study was developed from an interview with Mr. Guy René Mombo, National Coordinator of RENAPSAJ in Gabon, and an active member of CS4ME. The interview took place on 13 January, 2022, and the text presented here has been reviewed by Guy.