

# Continuous LLIN Distribution

## Accountable Partnership: Singing from the Same Songbook & Knowing the Score

M A L A W I

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Managing an effective programme for continuous distribution of long-lasting insecticidal nets (LLINs) on a national scale is much like conducting an orchestra: The National Malaria Control Programme (NMCP) serves as conductor; the country's malaria strategic plan and LLIN guidelines are the musical score; and, whenever one of the players (or partners) gets out of tune or plays a wrong note, everyone knows about it immediately.



Doreen Ali of the Malawi NMCP chairs this year's annual malaria planning meeting with partners.

Doreen Ali, Malawi's Deputy Director of Preventive Health Services, who is responsible for malaria control, certainly knows the score when it comes to the role that broad, well-coordinated, and accountable partnership has played in Malawi's more than 10 years of success with national-scale continuous distribution of insecticide-treated mosquito nets (ITNs). According to Ms. Ali, "Broad partnership has been the key to our success over the years. We have a clear national strategy and clear national ITN guidelines. Our partners helped develop



these policies, and so they know them inside and out. They also know our team well. This makes it easy and natural for partners to proactively come forward to help implement, coordinate, and, most importantly, fill gaps when needed."

### UNDERSTANDING THE KEYS TO MALAWI'S SUCCESS WITH CONTINUOUS DISTRIBUTION

To better understand Malawi's success with continuous net distribution, the Roll Back Malaria (RBM) Vector Control Working Group interviewed more than 20 stakeholders who have helped make it happen. These interviews were surprising on several counts. Most notable was the consistency of the responses and views gathered from across the wide spectrum of government health officials, development assistance agencies, implementing partners, District Health Management Teams, and antenatal clinic personnel. Again and again, those interviewed cited three key elements upon which the country's continuous net distribution programme has been built: strong leadership and guidelines, priority on nets, and broad partnership.

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MALAWI'S SUCCESS ...	... THE FOUNDATION OF THE SUCCESS		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Launched Africa's first national scale continuous ITN distribution programme in 2002.</li> <li>Sustained distribution and availability of nets targeting pregnant women and children under five via more than 600 government-run clinics nationwide since scale-up.</li> <li>Increased net ownership from 13% to 67% of households, between 2002 and 2010 (DHS data), with over 85% of all nets distributed through continuous channels.</li> </ul>	Strong National Leadership & Guidelines	Priority on nets	Broad Partnership
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The NMCP works with partners to jointly develop and maintain clear national ITN/LLIN guidelines.</li> <li>A single document clearly defines the roles and responsibilities of key partners, as well as some critical 'dos and don'ts'.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Malawi decided early on to promote ITN use as the country's primary tool for vector control.</li> <li>Focus is placed first, year after year, on funding net procurement, net promotion, and net distribution.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>All of Malawi's major donor &amp; implementing partners support one national net promotion &amp; distribution strategy.</li> <li>The NMCP and its partners never divided the country up into different project zones.</li> </ul>



## BUILDING A FOUNDATION FOR SUCCESS

Malawi’s experience demonstrates that it takes much more than simply assembling a broad and diverse set of qualified and talented partners to make a national net distribution programme function effectively over time. Most critically, the programme must be built upon a solid foundation that empowers partners to take action and hold one another mutually accountable for their joint success or failure. Once a framework for accountability is in place, the funding needed to operate at a national scale must be consistently mobilized, year-in and year-out. The three fundamental building blocks of Malawi’s success identified again and again by the NMCP and its key stakeholders are examined below.

### 1. Ensuring accountability through strong national leadership and clear national ITN/LLIN guidelines

According to those interviewed, the strong, sustained leadership of the Directorate for Preventive Health Services and its National Malaria Control Programme has been the most vital element of Malawi’s success. In addition to the leadership of key individuals within government, Malawi has benefited from the vision and expertise of partner organizations such as WHO, UNICEF, USAID, DfID, CDC, JICA, GTZ, and PSI. When asked to elaborate further, nearly all the interviewees cited the NMCP’s decision to develop with its partners a clear set of national ITN guidelines as the policy action most central to creating transparency and accountability. This has enabled Malawi’s continuous net distribution partnership to work effectively and harmoniously since it was scaled up nationally in 2002.



The Malawi NMCP’s ‘green nets’ protect the country’s most vulnerable.

Malawi’s “Guidelines for the Management of Insecticide Treated Nets / Materials Programme” were first published in June 2002 to “coordinate the efforts of the Government of Malawi and its key stakeholders to effectively utilize their resources in a targeted and uniform fashion to meet the goals agreed in the Abuja Declaration”. The guidelines were developed through a series of collaborative meetings and workshops involving the NMCP, multi-lateral and bilateral partners, international and local non-governmental organization (NGO) implementing partners, research institutions, and district health officials. In 2007 the guidelines were updated to reflect the country’s shift from highly subsidized distribution to free distribution in late 2006, and updated again after shifting to LLINs in 2008–2009. New revisions to the guidelines are under consideration to reflect the current national strategic focus on achieving Universal Coverage (UC). The different aspects of continuous net distribution defined by Malawi’s national ITN guidelines are summarized in Table 1.

**Table 1. Aspects of Continuous Net Distribution Defined in Malawi’s National ITN Guidelines**

<b>A. Material specifications for:</b>	<b>B. Roles and responsibilities of partners for:</b>	<b>C. Guidelines and rules covering:</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Netting</li> <li>• Insecticides</li> <li>• Net colours, sizes, and shapes allowed for public-sector channels (to aid in monitoring and control).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Procurement</li> <li>• Storage</li> <li>• Transportation/distribution</li> <li>• Promotion.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Eligibility for free public-sector nets/materials</li> <li>• Means and channels for reaching target groups</li> <li>• Pricing of/incentives for nets (when applicable)</li> <li>• Training of health workers and community leaders</li> <li>• Joint monitoring and evaluation.</li> </ul>

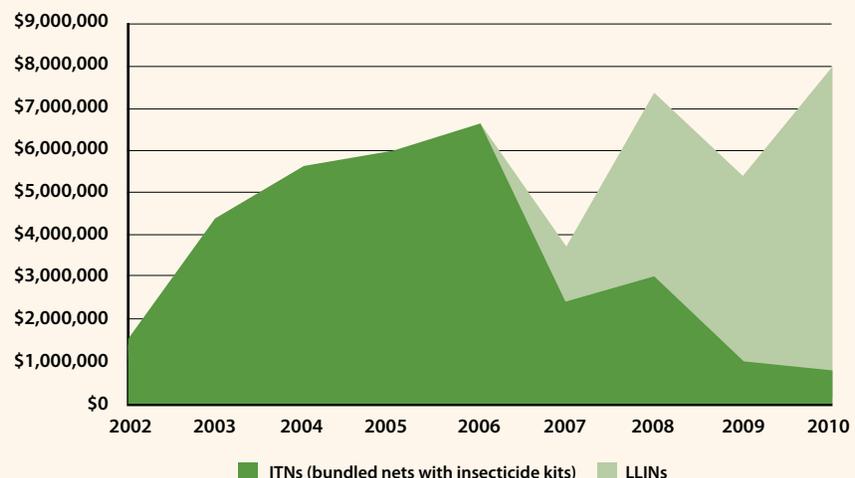


## 2. Placing priority on nets for vector control to mobilize funding over the long term

Malawi's long-term success with continuous distribution of mosquito nets has required an ongoing, high level of commitment to using insecticide-treated mosquito nets as the pre-eminent tool for vector control nationwide. Malawi's commitment to ITNs started in the early 1990s, when much of the world began recognizing that insecticide-treated nets were significantly more effective at preventing malaria than conventional nets. At that same time, Malawi was conducting cutting-edge research to better understand the entomological factors associated with malaria transmission and on the development of resistance associated with prophylaxis use. The results of this research, along with growing evidence at the time that ITNs were highly efficacious, emboldened the leaders of Malawi's young National Malaria Control Programme to shift programmatic focus from treatment to prevention as the cornerstone of its disease control efforts.

This sustained commitment to nets as the primary vector control strategy has been vital to focusing the resources of the nation and of the broad range of bi-lateral and multi-lateral partners supporting malaria control in Malawi. Figure 1 shows the NMCP's success in securing the funds needed to grow and maintain its continuous distribution programme over time. The graph also highlights the short-term disruptions in programme implementation that occurred during Malawi's shifts to free net distribution in 2006–2007 and to the focus on Universal Coverage in 2008–2009.

**Figure 1. Estimated Procurement Value of Nets Delivered through Continuous Channels**



supported by different donors and/or implementing partners.

According to several of the stakeholders interviewed, Malawi also has the “advantage of being small enough to get your arms around,” making it easier to manage the logistics of operating at national scale. Malawi's stakeholders also stated that this well-coordinated partnership, combined with the existence of clear national policies, makes it easier for partners to fill resource gaps as they arise. Examples of this include: JICA stepping in to procure 600,000 nets to help meet unanticipated needs during national scale-up, the emergency provision of ITNs and distribution funding by GTZ to help make a smooth transition from highly subsidized net distribution to free net distribution, UNICEF's ability to manage emergency procurements of nets when needed, the supply of ‘jumpstart LLINs’ by PMI to help the NMCP accelerate the move from ITNs to LLINs, and the contribution of additional nets for continuous distribution by partners such as the Anglican Church, Plan International, and the Malawi Red Cross.

## 3. Engaging a broad range of partners to help manage change and fill gaps

Broad partnership was cited unanimously by the stakeholders interviewed as a crucial element of Malawi's long-term success with continuous net distribution. More importantly, they went on to laud the NMCP for aligning the resources and energies of all its partners to support one national net distribution and promotion strategy. Unlike many other countries, Malawi has never been ‘divided up’ into different implementation areas

**“Malawi's success has been all about partnership. All of the partners worked together from the beginning, and they continue to work closely together with the NMCP.”**

*Allan Macheso, former Malawi National Malaria Control Programme Manager*



## PUTTING ACCOUNTABLE PARTNERSHIP TO WORK

By putting these building blocks in place, the Malawi NMCP has created an implementation environment that allows partners to make decisions and take action, while holding each other mutually accountable. The efforts of the NMCP to create this 'enabling environment' have resulted in improved availability of nets and rapid increases in net use and ownership. Also, as is shown in Figure 2, the transparency and accountability built into Malawi's continuous distribution partnership have played an important part both in the country's success in competing for Global Fund financing and in creating a genuine culture of net use nationwide.

## KEY LESSONS AND FUTURE CHALLENGES

Malawi's pioneering experiences and success with continuous net distribution demonstrate the need to engage a wide range of partners to support a unified national strategy, the importance of strong leadership, the critical role of national ITN guidelines, and the need to place a high priority on nets for vector control. Yet there are also lessons to be learned from the difficulties encountered along the way. As noted above, Malawi's continuous net distribution efforts have gone

through significant, although short-term, disruptions during times of major policy change. It is possible to simply accept these drops in performance as a normal consequence of change. There is a deeper lesson to be learned, however.

During these periods of transition, roles and responsibilities of partners change, and often the existing national ITN guidelines will no longer fit the operational and policy context. Malawi's experience shows that it is essential during such periods of change that ITN guidelines be updated as quickly as possible to ensure that transparency and accountability within the partnership are maintained. Like many other countries, Malawi is currently navigating a transition from a targeted net distribution strategy (prioritizing pregnant women and children under five) to a strategy designed to achieve Universal Coverage. While operational plans and funding are in place to make this transition successfully, the national ITN guidelines have yet to be formally updated. The move to a national strategy supporting Universal Coverage is clearly a major change. To achieve Universal Coverage, the NMCP will need to broaden collaborations, bringing in both additional donors and implementing partners. This makes it even more important that Malawi's current process to update the ITN guidelines be carried-out through a highly participatory process and that it be completed as soon as possible.

**Figure 2. The Role of Government: Creating an Enabling Environment, Ensuring Accountability**



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