



Ministry of Health

National Malaria Control Program of Liberia

**Addressing COVID-19 related
rumors during ITN mass
campaign – challenges and
recommendations**

March 30, 2022

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Background

- Liberia located in West Africa is the oldest African Republic comprising of 5 regions, 15 counties (subdivisions) and 93 health districts.
- Malaria is endemic in Liberia with continuous transmission throughout the year.
- The entire population of approximately 5 million people is at risk.
- Malaria accounts for approximately 34% and 48% of all outpatient and inpatient cases, respectively. (***Health Facility Survey, NMCP, 2018***)
- The dominant species of malaria parasites in Liberia is plasmodium falciparum (95%).
- The climate is favorable for mosquito breeding: *Anopheles gambiaes s.l.* (major vector), *Anopheles funestus s.l.* and *An.melas* (secondary vectors).



Since 2008, the National Malaria Control Program has distributed millions of ITNs through routine and mass campaigns

ITN mass campaigns

- Nationwide mass ITN campaigns started in 2015 with over 2.8 million nets distributed.
- Followed in 2018 where 2.4 million nets distributed
- Most recent ITN mass campaign was in 2021 where 2.6 million IG2 nets distributed
- The ITN mass campaign was funded by the Global Fund with technical support from local RBM partners and the Alliance for Malaria Prevention (AMP)

Campaign Strategy

The 2021 LLINs mass campaign was implemented with two strategies:

Household registration:

- Door to door household registration in all targeted communities

ITN distribution

- Door to door distribution in **urban areas**
- fixed site distribution in **rural areas**.
- The counties were divided into urban (Montserrado) and rural (the rest of the 14 counties)

Use of vouchers:

- Vouchers distributed while registering households in **rural** settings while households in **urban** were registered without issuing voucher
- The Campaign POA had an elaborate COVID 19 section addressing infection, prevention and control

ITN campaign rumors

- By early July 2021, many counties had started reporting the emergence of rumours that were negatively impacting distribution, acceptance and use of the ITNs.
- Between July 9-12, 2021, the NMCP conducted a rapid assessment among County Health Teams to assess
 - the scope and scale of rumors affecting the ITN campaign
 - possible communication channels to address the rumors
- A “Rapid Assessment” template was developed to help county health teams report on the rumors
- 11 counties (73%) completed the assessment: **Grand Bassa; Grand Cape Mount; Grand Gedeh; Grand Kru; Bomi; Lofa; Maryland; Montserrado; Nimba; River Gee; Sinoe**
- 4 counties: **Bong; River Cess; Margibi; Gbarpolu** did not complete the assessment



Town crier in River Gee Counties providing awareness on benefits of ITNs use

Type of rumors identified

Rumours identifying the ITNs as harmful

- The nets contain poison that can / have killed people in Liberia
- The nets have chemicals that will kill people to reduce the population (“that is why they asked us to hang it outside before use.”)

Rumors of intent to cause harm

- “Since black people never died like the whites, they brought the nets so we can die.”
- “The ITNs were brought in the county to kill a larger population of River Gee which will happen when anybody sleeps under the nets. They will die because the nets have deadly and poisonous chemicals embedded in them.”

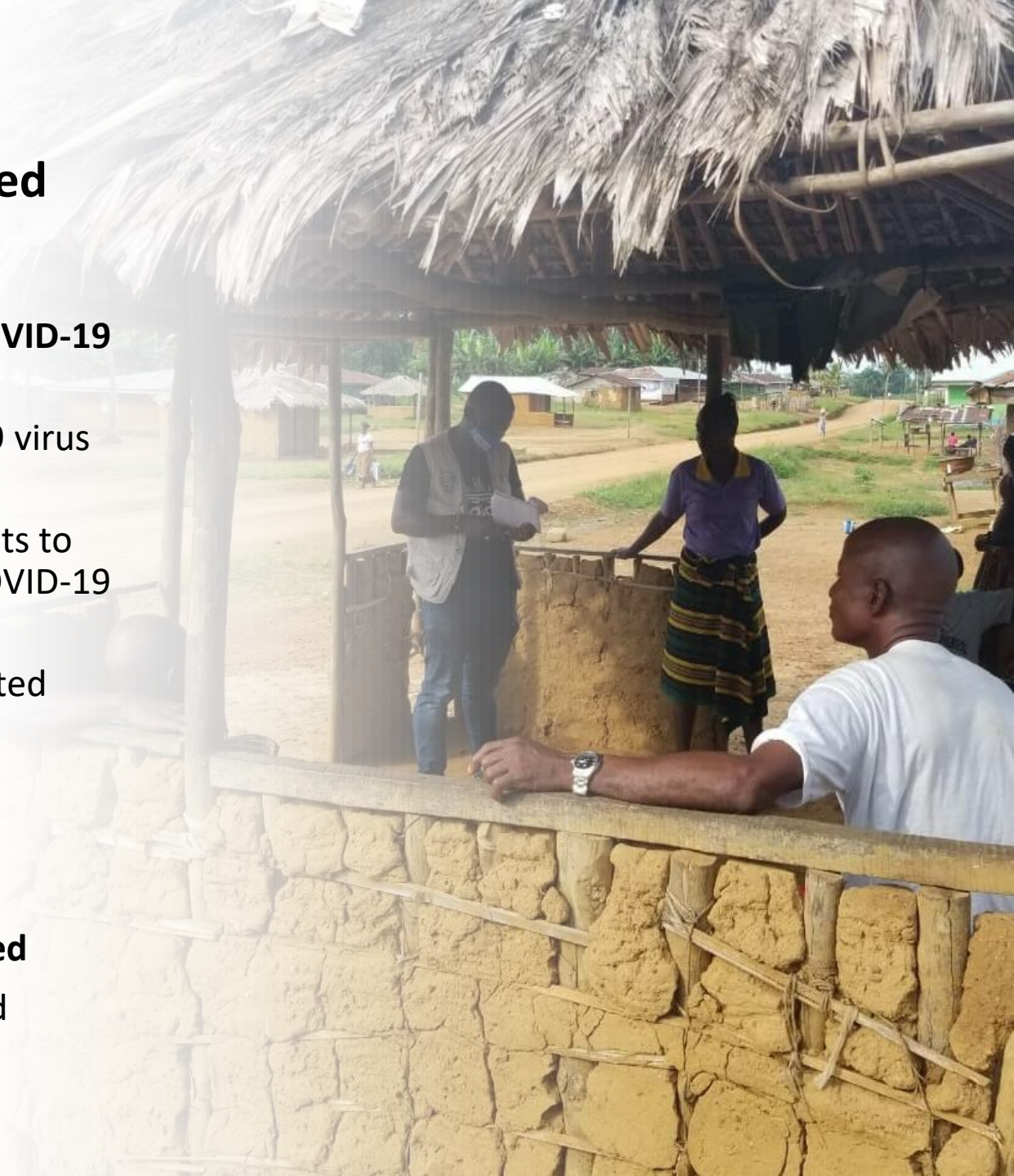
Type of rumors identified (Cont.)

Rumors linking the ITNs to COVID-19 / intent to cause harm

- The MOH placed COVID-19 virus in the nets
- The MOH is distributing nets to increase the number of COVID-19 cases
- The nets contain/are infected with the COVID-19 virus
- Health workers are placing COVID-19 virus in the nets

Other type of rumors identified

- The nets are manufactured under the sea



Scope and scale of COVID-19 related rumors

The spread of rumors varied from county to county

Counties most affected

- **(entire county):** Sinoe, Grand Kru, and Montserrado
- **Montserrado:** Rumors cut across the 7 health districts
- **Sinoe:** Rumors were circulating within the 356 communities across the 10 health districts
- **Grand Kru:** Rumors were circulating across the entire county i.e. In all 5 health districts



Scale of COVID-19 related rumors (Cont.)

Counties with <50% spread:

Grand Gedeh: Reported that 50% of the 6 districts reported common rumors related to ITN use (e.g. nets create more heat – this goes beyond the some people talking about heat while sleeping under nets in some places). One rumor that was only reported in Konobo district links ITN use to death

Maryland: Rumors circulating within 3 of 6 districts, including: Pleebo District--Pleebo City; Barobo Fajah; Harper City

Nimba: Rumors were gathered from 2 of the 6 health districts: Saclepea and Sanniquellie-Mah districts

River Gee: Rumor limited to 3 of 6 districts: Potupo, Webbo, and Tienpo

Grand Bassa: Rumors were gathered from 3 of 8 health districts: District 4 and District 3 A & B

Lofa: The CHT reported that rumors were limited to 1 or 2 communities only

Counties reporting no rumors: Bomi and Grand Cape Mount

Impact of COVID-19 related rumors

- Delays in ITN distribution:
 - Community members not coming to the fixed distribution points to receive their ITNs.
- Households reluctant to use their ITNs or not using ITNs correctly
 - River Gee completed distribution before the rumor started spreading, leading some people to no want to sleep under the nets
 - Households using ITNs for purposes other than sleeping. E.g. Observed that that newly received ITNs were being used as rope or for their farms
- Households not properly maintaining their ITNs
 - Observed that households were airing their nets directly in the sun or rain before use
- Households destroying their ITNs by burning or burying

Plans to counter Rumors

The Communication Technical Working Group then began to plan and strategize on mechanisms to counter the rumors.

1. Communication channels were identified
 - These were partly identified through the rapid assessment template and also based on the communications PoA
2. Resident partners in affected Counties began to immediately intervene in collaboration with County Health Teams
3. A long term (9 months) post campaign SBC plan of action aimed at optimizing nets ownership, use, care and maintenance was developed and costed

Communication channels identified to counter rumors

The following communication channels / SBC activities were identified as best suited for the affected areas based on the Rapid Assessment template

- Community engagement meeting with local leaders (Town chiefs, traditional and religious leaders)
- CHAs/CHVs
- Community focus group discussions
- Messaging through Town Criers
- Radio talk shows on local community radios
- Publicity awareness (PA system mounted on vehicle)
- Mass media

Communication channels identified to counter rumors (Cont.)

Planned SBC activities

Only 4 counties had already completed planned SBC activities

The other 10 counties had the following pending SBC activities that could be used to respond to the rumors

- Coordination meetings
- Airing of ITNs jingles
- Radio talk show
- Community engagement meetings
- Advocacy meetings
- Facilities health talks
- The use of CHAs/CHVs and/or using other community structures
- Press conference

Immediate response

- County Health Teams and Partners began to react to rumors based on context in each county
- Caution was placed on mode of response to avoid further spread of the rumors
- Counties that were entirely affected by rumors:
 - a countywide campaign to counter the rumors
- Counties where rumors affected certain districts:
 - the interventions targeted only affected districts to reduce the risk of these rumors spilling to other districts
- Counter interventions included:
 - Radio talk shows
 - Community mobilization through local leadership
 - Announcements aimed at informing the public about the safety of the nets

Long term costed SBC plan

- The NMCP and Partners developed a costed SBC Plan dedicated to scaling up nets ownership, use, care and maintenance in households
- Roles and responsibilities were clearly defined between county health teams and partners
- However, funding for the SBC plan could not be sourced
- 12 counties have funding for ongoing SBC activities which include ITN components
- Three counties rely on national broadcasters to transmit LLINs related messages

Challenges

- COVID 19 rumors surfaced during the ITN distribution
 - This may be because the ITN distribution occurred during Liberia's third wave of COVID-19 infections
- Rumor management plan was not finalized and adopted as part of communication PoA
- Delays in implementation of SBC activities
 - Delays in the disbursements of funds to implement SBC activities
 - Delays in signing MOU with Implementing partners and County Health Teams to conduct SBC activities
 - Delays in conducting SBC activities (advocacy meeting at county and district levels, town crier)
 - Late disseminating of print materials and audio messages
- Slow start
- Lack of funding to implement long term plan to scale up ITN ownership, use, care and maintenance

Recommendations

- Anticipate rumors as part of the ongoing ITN mass campaign planning and implementation:
 - Develop and adopt a rumor management plan as part of the communications plan of action
 - Assess all risks related to campaign planning and implementation to avoid surprises
- Avoid further circulation of rumors
 - Do not mention or address rumors in public or in areas where they are not occurring
- Engage and involve local stakeholders before and during the ITN mass campaign
- Modify talking points (based on any new information).
 - The talking points help ensure consistency in the key messages among all stakeholders
 - Ensure talking points are inline with ongoing SBC
- Use testimonials from community members to motivate peers through experience-sharing
- Disseminate a press release (from influential personalities)

Acknowledgements

- BreakThrough Action
- Plan International Liberia
- Chemonics
- President's Malaria Initiative/USAID
- GFATM/PCU
- WHO Liberia
- Heads of Technical Clusters



THANK YOU