

WORLD MALARIA DAY

The silent killer

The EU must honour its development commitments and invest in the global fight against malaria, writes **Michèle Striffler**

April 25 2011 marks the fourth world malaria day. Malaria is a preventable and treatable infectious disease killing more than 780,000 people every year with more than 90 per cent of these deaths occurring in Africa. It is deeply shocking that malaria continues to kill more young children than any other single disease, claiming the life of a child every 45 seconds.

Fortunately, significant progress has been made in recent years to achieve universal coverage targets for malaria interventions, aimed at protecting all populations at risk of the disease. In 2010, malaria prevention efforts saved 485 children's lives in Africa every day and global malaria deaths have dropped by almost 10 per cent during the last four years.

Investing in malaria pays, and I believe malaria control is a highly cost-effective child health intervention, representing one of today's best investments in global health. But the gains are fragile, and there is a real risk of backsliding on our gains if we do not capitalise on the current momentum. Therefore, in order to achieve further progress towards reaching the millennium development goals, we need more predictable and sustained funding. The EU, as provider of 60 per cent of global aid flows, must honour its international aid commitments, including reaching the individual 0.7 per cent GNI target for official development assistance by 2015 for EU member states.

Distribution of free bed nets to all at-risk populations is generally considered to be the most rapid and cost effective way to reach universal coverage, and is the approach that has already

been used successfully in many countries. We can save the lives of three million African children by 2015 through universal malaria prevention coverage alone. With the incredible progress that has been achieved, the focus must now be on maintaining bed net coverage and ensuring high levels of net utilisation, while increasing efforts to expand access to diagnosis and effective treatment. In this mission, the role played by the global fund to fight Aids, tuberculosis and malaria is critical. The EU should strongly support this innovative and country-owned financing mechanism that has achieved incredible results while applying zero tolerance for corruption and full transparency regarding its policies.

Finally, the 2015 goal of near zero deaths from malaria will not be achieved without sustained investment in malaria research and development of new tools. Indeed, exciting progress is being made in the development of new drugs, rapid diagnostic tests, insecticides, and vaccines to fight the disease. With a first-generation vaccine on the horizon, it is time for donors and endemic countries to be thinking about how it would fit into their development assistance and malaria control programmes. With the biggest public research programme in the world, the commission has a clear responsibility to increase funding for poverty-related diseases and for malaria research specifically. In addition to medical research, the EU should also invest more in operational research to allow for data driven malaria programmes on the ground.

Malaria is a global emergency that affects mostly poor women and children thereby perpetuating a vicious cycle of poverty in the developing world. With only four years left until 2015 and the millennium development goals target, it is vital that the EU continues to invest in the fight against malaria in order to sustain progress and accelerate efforts. As an MEP, I am committed to ensuring that the EU honours its responsibility as a donor and global partner to achieve a malaria-free world. ★

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Michèle Striffler is first vice-chair of parliament's development committee and permanent rapporteur for humanitarian aid

