

Success Story: Operation of disease control programmes during the COVID-19 pandemic, South Sudan

Background Information

The MENTOR Initiative has been active in South Sudan since May 2012 providing malaria and other VBDs prevention and control as well as WASH activities in target vulnerable locations of UNS, NBeGL, Warrap and Unity states.

MENTOR's yearly IRS campaigns target every shelter in the camps as well as the nearby host communities. This activity is implemented just before the yearly rains start, to protect people throughout the malaria high-transmission season. IRS also protects people from other endemic VBDs such as Visceral Leishmaniasis. Larval source management and fly control activities are conducted as supplementary interventions to IRS together with complementary IEC/BCC sessions, whereby messages on malaria and other VBDs, how to identify, prevent and manage them are communicated.

Furthermore, training and technical coaching is provided to health care workers (HCWs) and managers/supervisors from health facilities in and around the camps. These trainings focus on the diagnosis of malaria and other VBDs as well as their appropriate treatment and case management. MENTOR also supplies medical commodities to these health facilities to prevent them from experiencing episodes of stock-outs and the subsequent inability to correctly diagnose and treat tropical diseases.

Malaria control amidst the COVID-19 pandemic

WHO has urgently called on countries to maintain core malaria control services whilst protecting health workers and communities against COVID-19 transmission. A WHO statement, shared widely on the 25th March 2020, was issued encouraging countries to maintain malaria-related activities and health services as a response to reports that some countries in sub-Saharan Africa had suspended malaria control activities due to the pandemic.

Key Challenges:

During the initial stages of the COVID-19 pandemic in South Sudan many routine activities were suspended and a significant number of expat staff were extracted from field locations. Despite this MENTOR ensured that all active programmes remained fully staffed and functional and COVID-19 precautions, regulations and messaging were rapidly integrated into routine activity. Disruption of life-saving disease control programmes was minimized through innovation, flexibility and maintaining strong relationships with implementing partners on the ground, particularly the Ministry of Health (MoH) and UNHCR. These organizations enabled MENTOR to receive essential commodities in time to implement the much-needed malaria prevention activities despite the nation-wide lockdown.

1. Overcoming fear:
 - Extraction of expat staff and suspension of activities by other organizations made local staff very uneasy about continuation of MENTORs activities. Both Juba office staff and Base Managers in the field ensured that implementing staff felt safe and comfortable through emotional support and provision of all relevant information as well as relevant training.



Encouraging implementing staff through being present in the field with them provided reassurance and was effective in reducing fear and panic.

2. Delivering activities whilst adhering to COVID-19 regulations:

- **Transport of goods:** COVID-19 border closures caused complications with timely delivery of insecticide and reception of an incorrect shipment which resulted in MENTOR receiving a shipment of a container filled with cars. This created temporary panic however with the support of the local MoH and UNHCR the incorrect container was returned and the insecticide Actellic was received in time for delivery of IRS activities prior to the rainy season in Ajoung Thok and Maban as well as the respective host communities.
- **Training IRS workers:** IRS workers were split into small groups of 10 to 12 during their training to ensure that safe distances were maintained and mask wearing was made mandatory. Hand washing stations were installed in all training venues and frequent hand washing was encouraged during delivery of the training. These sessions were either held in spacious halls or in open air under a tree.
- **IRS service delivery:** IRS workers were provided with full PPE and social distancing measures were put in place to ensure that adequate distance was kept between IRS workers and beneficiaries. IRS workers were also responsible for delivering COVID-19 messages.
IEC/BCC service delivery: IEC/BCC group sessions became impossible to implement due to the COVID-19 restrictions on public gatherings. Instead of abandoning the activity MENTOR decided to alter the mode of delivery in order to adhere to the new regulations and IEC/BCC messaging was delivered via a door-to-door campaign. During this campaign it was ensured that appropriate distances were maintained between staff and beneficiaries and COVID-19 messaging was integrated into the health messages and IEC/BCC materials delivered.
- **WASH Activities:** UNICEF funded WASH activities in 3 states of Northern Bahr el Ghazal also ran undisrupted during these months reaching a total of **144,519** beneficiaries with COVID-19 risk communication and awareness messages.

Table 1: Summary of outreach during COVID-19 pandemic

Activity	Total
IRS & IEC/BCC on VBDs and COVID-19	Households covered: 44,693 Beneficiaries reached: 238,787
Treatment of breeding sites	Mosquito breeding sites: 84,428 Fly breeding sites: 88,309
Trainings	Total trained for IRS activity: 704 Total Health workers trained: 70 Total Health workers trained on basic entomology: 24
Door to Door IEC/BCC	Beneficiaries reached: 4,532
WASH activities in Aweil	Total beneficiaries reached: 367,212 Beneficiaries reached by COVID-19 messaging: 144,519

3. Filling the gaps:

- **Medical supplies:** Like the rest of the world, the South Sudan government-imposed ban on all air travel (local & international) and closed all borders with neighboring countries. Roads remained closed and movement of goods from the other countries was suspended for a

number of months. There was fear among agencies that restriction on air and land transport would cause shortage of essential medical supplies including anti-malaria drugs and testing kits. However, with ample supplies of anti-malaria drugs and RDTs already prepositioned, partners never experienced any shortage of these items. MENTOR assisted with continued gap filling of these commodities ensuring uninterrupted provision of health services to the local communities in all health facilities in the 6 supported camps and nearby host communities.

- **WASH supplies:** MENTOR supported the County Health Director (CHD) office by providing the soaps & clean water facilities for the prevention of COVID-19
- **COVID-19 IEC service delivery:** MENTOR maintained good relations with the NGO forum and received the COVID-19 prevention IEC materials free of cost in sufficient quantities for the distribution in the vulnerable communities. The IEC materials were well-designed pictorial in English & local languages.
- **Technical Assistance:** MENTOR assisted UNHCR with the disinfection of local schools through provision of spray pumps and technical support and guidance.

Key Achievements:

1. Through the delivery of timely IRS and other VBD activities in MENTORs programme areas, the target population was protected from the typical malaria surge following the end of the rainy season. Areas such as Bentiu PoC where timely IRS activity was not conducted experienced very high case-loads at the end of the rainy season.
2. Stock-outs of medical supplies were prevented and appropriate management of malaria cases was maintained.
3. UNICEF funded WASH activities ran uninterrupted and were completed within the original set time frame.
4. COVID-19 recommendations were successfully integrated into program implementation for all MENTORs activities. Ensuring safety of both staff and beneficiaries.
5. COVID-19 messaging and risk communication was successfully integrated into trainings and service delivery of all MENTOR programmes ensuring effective dissemination of information and uptake of precautionary measures.
6. Suffering and deaths from tropical diseases were effectively averted through continuation of MENTORs life-saving work during the global pandemic.

The dynamic nature of MENTOR as an organization enabled successful integration of COVID-19 messages, guidelines and precautions into disease control and health promotion activities. Continuation of MENTOR activities not only prevented deaths and suffering from the targeted VBDs and WASH-related illnesses of our programmes but also improved awareness and hygiene practices in relation to COVID-19 and provided support to the local authorities and partner agencies in coping with the burden of the pandemic.

Malaria incidence data in locations that received timely IRS from MENTOR during the pandemic.

Figure 1: Malaria incidence per 1000 population in Maban refugee camps

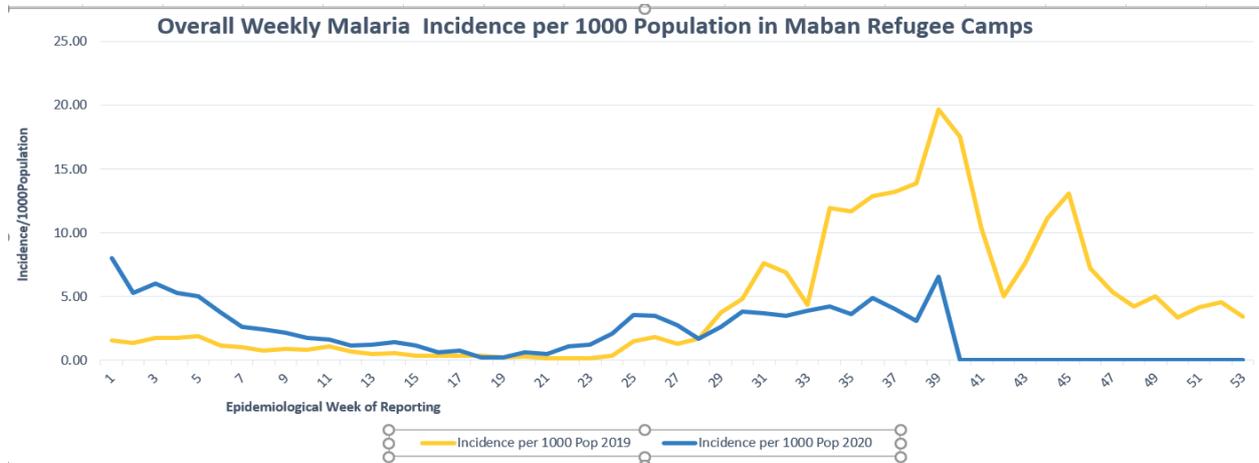


Figure 2: Malaria incidence per 1000 population in Jamjang refugee camps

