

Footballers give malaria the boot

Africa's most admired football superstars have added their voices to the United Against Malaria (UAM) campaign that will be distributing malaria prevention and treatment messages during the 2013 Orange Africa Cup of Nations (Afcon) tournament in South Africa.



In Cote d'Ivoire images of Didier Drogba and his teammates will be used in various educational materials, reminding people to sleep under treated mosquito nets every night.

Football icons including Didier Drogba, Samuel Eto'o and South Africa's Steven Pienaar, along with presidents Ellen Johnson Sirleaf of Liberia, Jakaya Kikwete of Tanzania, Blaise Compaoré of Burkina Faso, Alassane Ouattara of Cote d'Ivoire and Yoweri Museveni of Uganda, will appear on television, radio, billboards, and in educational materials that will be distributed across Africa. These heads of state are members of the African Leaders Malaria Alliance.

The Afcon football tournament is organised biennially by the Confederation of African Football (CAF). The tournament, hosted in partnership with the local organising committee of the South African Football Association (Safa) will take place from 19 January to 10 February next year.

The UAM campaign, which was founded in the lead-up to the 2010 Fifa World Cup, is an alliance of football teams, celebrities, health and advocacy organisations, governments, corporations and individuals who have joined forces to win the fight against malaria.

It is an initiative of the Roll Back Malaria (RBM) Partnership, which consists of more than 200 partners that invest their experience, time, funds and skills to provide a coordinated global approach to end malaria deaths by 2015. The RBM Partnership was founded by Unicef, the World Health Organisation, the UN Development Programme and the World Bank.

A disease without borders

Speaking in Johannesburg at the launch of the new health campaign, Hevré Verhoosel, head of external relations for the RBM Partnership, said football is a powerful medium that can be used to reach millions of fans across Africa.

Approximately 90% of global malaria deaths occur in Africa, where children under the age of five and pregnant women are at greatest risk of infection. Six countries, namely Nigeria, Democratic Republic of Congo, Burkina Faso, Mozambique, Cote d'Ivoire and Mali account for 60% of malaria deaths worldwide.

The good news is that malaria can be prevented and treated, and simple tools such as insecticide-treated mosquito nets, rapid testing and treatment, as well as indoor spraying can save lives. For example, insecticide-treated nets can cause a 10-20% reduction in child mortality.

Yet, malaria kills a child in Africa every 60 seconds and costs the continent an estimated minimum of R105-billion (US\$12 billion) in lost productivity and healthcare costs each year.

At the event Safa president Kirsten Nematandani said the universal appeal of football, coupled with high profile events such as Afcon, is an ideal way to spread the message of malaria prevention.

"Football cuts across all cultures and nations," Nematandani said. "The campaign is a step in the right direction, considering that our continent is suffering. One life lost is one too many."

Samuel Eto'o, Cameroonian national team player and UAM champion, appealed to football fans to support the campaign.

"Across the continent football dominates the hearts and minds of children and parents alike," Eto'o said in a statement, "but so does malaria - the cause of 174-million illnesses and nearly 600 000 deaths in Africa alone every year."

Didier Drogba, Cote d'Ivoire national team captain and malaria survivor said he has first-hand experience of the devastating effects of the malaria on families and individuals.

He was diagnosed with malaria in 2010, following a blood test. Drogba is among several footballers who teamed up for the UAM campaign to end malaria deaths in Africa by 2015.

Football heroes to spread the word

Hicham El Amrani, secretary-general of the CAF, said the confederation and UAM are committed to using the tournament as a platform to communicate important messaging to end malaria deaths.

Throughout the tournament, malaria messages will be shared using football players, favourite teams and sports programmes in countries such as Nigeria, Malawi, Benin, Ghana, Uganda and Tanzania.

In these countries the campaign will also be complemented by public service announcements on air. The announcements have been recorded in over 18 African languages, to ensure the UAM messages reach every household.

In Cote d'Ivoire images of Drogba and his teammates Kolo Toure, Gervais Lombe Yao Kouassi (better known as Gervinho) and Salomon Kalou will be used in various educational materials, reminding people to sleep under treated mosquito nets every night, encouraging fans to get tested, know the symptoms of malaria and undergo treatment if they are infected.

Messages with impact

The method of message delivery is as important as their content. The results of a survey indicated that audiences retain and act on messages more often when delivered by their football heroes.

After watching or hearing a UAM public service announcement during the 2010 Fifa World Cup, 6.6-million Tanzanians reported taking action to ensure that their families sleep under a treated mosquito net every night.

This kind of action by individuals, coupled with grassroots messaging and advocacy through football, is proving successful in dealing with the continent-wide malaria scourge.

In a statement Steven Pienaar, the former captain of South African national team Bafana Bafana, said he is honoured to be a champion for this cause.

"It is unacceptable that malaria kills one child in Africa every minute," Pienaar said. "We can take such simple steps to prevent and treat this disease. United we can beat malaria."

Malaria interventions working, but more work ahead

Interventions to fight malaria on the continent are more co-ordinated than ever before, and have prevented more than one-million child malaria deaths in sub-Saharan Africa between 2001 and 2010.

Further, 43 malaria-endemic countries have reported declines of malaria cases and deaths by at least 50%.

Insecticide-treated bed nets, indoor residual spraying and rapid testing and treatment are three cost-effective tools that are proving highly successful to combat the disease. Access to these tools, through RBM Partnership campaigns, have resulted in a 25% reduction in global malaria deaths and a decline by a third in Africa since 2000.

Since 2008, 294-million treated nets have been distributed in Africa, enough to cover 73% of the population at risk. In 2011, 81-million people were protected by indoor spraying, up from 15-million in 2005. The use of rapid testing and treatment has increased from 11.2-million courses of medication in 2005, to 287-million in 2011.

Bracelets for malaria

The UAM beaded bracelet initiative has also become a well-known symbol of the fight against malaria.

To raise awareness and funds for this cause, fast food chain Nando's and other South African businesses partnered with Relate, a local not-for-profit social enterprise, to create bracelets for United Against Malaria.

Each bracelet sold raises funds for mosquito nets for thousands of people in sub-Saharan Africa who cannot afford to buy their own.

The bracelets also provide a much-needed income and skills and enterprise development opportunities for the crafters, many of whom are HIV-affected men and women.

To date 400 000 bracelets have been sold and about R9 (\$1) of each sale goes towards the Global Fund to Fight Aids, Tuberculosis and Malaria, the world's largest distributor of mosquito nets.

According to Nando's director Sherwin Charles, the project is providing employment for 240 people in Cape Town's townships.

"This has been a phenomenal success and legacy of the 2010 World Cup that we are still selling these bracelets," Charles says. "They are making a difference in terms of job creation and action against malaria."

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