

## At a glance: Nigeria

### Text messages bolster world's largest distribution of mosquito nets



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Children in Nigeria's Kano state receive insecticide-treated bed nets at the launch of a recent malaria prevention campaign. RapidSMS text messaging is supporting the distribution of the nets, which are essential to preventing malaria.

By Geoffrey Njoku and Paula Fedeski

*World Malaria Day, 25 April, focused this year on the challenge of achieving universal coverage with essential malaria-control interventions. Here is a story of progress and challenges in one malaria-endemic country, Nigeria.*

KANO STATE, Nigeria, 26 April 2010 – As communities across the globe commemorate World Malaria Day, UNICEF Nigeria and its partners are bringing a tech-savvy twist to their work in preventing this deadly disease.

This year, Rapid Short Message Service (SMS) text messages across Nigeria are helping to track the distribution of some 63 million mosquito nets – the largest campaign of its kind to date.

#### Reducing malaria's burden

Malaria remains a major public health problem in Nigeria, accounting for nearly 110 million clinically diagnosed cases per year, 60 per cent of outpatient health-care visits and 30 per cent of hospitalizations. At least 200,000 children die of malaria each year, and up to 11 per cent of maternal mortality is caused by the disease.

Nation-wide in Nigeria, malaria accounts for one in every five deaths of children and 1 in 10 deaths of pregnant women. In addition to its direct health impact, the disease imposes a heavy social and economic burden: an estimated \$900 million is lost to malaria annually in prevention and treatment costs and productivity loss.

The campaign – a joint effort by the National Malaria Control Programme and Roll Back Malaria partners in Nigeria – uses Rapid SMS messages to track the distribution of long-lasting insecticide treated mosquito nets. Eleven states have already received 19 million nets, and millions more nets will be distributed by the end of this year.

#### Real data in real time

The goal of the campaign is to reduce Nigeria's burden of malaria by half by the end of 2010. Powerful information chains, activated by SMS text messages, streamline the distribution effort.

At the warehouse where the nets are stored, a stock manager dispatches a truckload to a main distribution centre and sends a coded text message to a remote server, reporting the number of nets on their way. The server which forwards an automatic message to the distribution centre.

When the truck arrives at the warehouse, a manager unloads the nets and uses another SMS text to report all inventory received. Yet another message alerts each local distribution point that bales of nets are on their way. After the nets are handed out locally, distribution team leaders submit text messages reporting the number of villages, households and individuals reached.

#### A technology with possibilities

The SMS messages are sent on ordinary mobile phones using no-charge shortcodes (short phone numbers for sending text messages). The codes are donated by the telecommunication companies MTN Nigeria and Zain mobile, in partnership with UNICEF Nigeria. Technical support is provided by UNICEF's Innovation Unit in New York.

UNICEF Nigeria has also tested Rapid SMS messaging in its current polio eradication initiative, part of a regional effort covering 19 countries in West and Central Africa. Experts believe that text messages could track and enable a fast response to non-compliance and vaccine shortages – major challenges faced by the campaign. The system will be piloted during the upcoming Child Health Weeks, a twice-yearly campaign that brings vaccines, vitamin A and de-worming treatments to children and women across the country.

Alongside its partners in government and the private sector, UNICEF is working to further explore the potential of mobile phone technology to protect children's well-being around the world.

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