

Our community agreement model for the release of non gene drive genetically modified fertile mosquitoes



Target Malaria is committed to engage communities that are affected by its research and to ensure they can make informed decisions about project activities that take place in their village or neighbourhood. At each phase of our technology development, we work closely with communities to share information about our work and ensure that no activity goes ahead without their agreement. Over the years, we have worked to improve and refine how the project works with communities and seeks their decisions on a variety of activities.

As Target Malaria enters a new phase of its research, preparing for the potential future release of non gene drive genetically modified male bias mosquitoes, the project has reviewed lessons learned from our first release of non gene drive sterile male mosquitoes in Burkina Faso, and updated its community agreement model to complement this new phase of work.

What is the community agreement model?

The community agreement model is a framework for collective decision-making by affected communities. Our current focus is the proposed future release of non gene drive male bias mosquitoes. The foundation of the model rests on Target Malaria's values, as well as on our stakeholder engagement strategy and guidelines. To these, it adds principles and commitments that guide how the project will seek decisions from

affected local communities, with the aim of ensuring that these decisions are informed, legitimate and appropriate to local contexts.

The model is based on the principle of co-development. In each country, the Target Malaria team and the local community will work together to determine the process that the community wishes to follow to come to a decision, in a way that meets both the community's preferred approach and the project's need for a decision that can meet its own ethical standards and sustain scrutiny from external stakeholders.

The model differentiates between communities where releases are proposed to take place, and communities living outside these areas, where only entomological monitoring activities will be proposed. The model focuses on how decisions regarding releases could be reached by "release" communities. It also recognises the importance of informing and engaging "monitoring" communities and obtaining their agreement for specific monitoring activities, such as mosquito collections.

Three underpinning principles:

- **Accountability** to our stakeholders: This is reflected in our commitment to publish and share this model, to document decision-making processes and their outcomes, and to monitor the implementation of the decisions taken by communities.

- **Legitimacy:** Our model continues to place the voice of the communities that are affected by our research at the centre of decision-making, ensuring that agreement processes are co-developed with them. We learned from our work on the non gene drive sterile male mosquitoes and broadened our engagement of external experts during the development of this model to ensure its legitimacy. National stakeholders will also be involved in the implementation of the model going forward.
- **Scalability:** The model is designed to be adaptable to different countries and contexts and scalable, should multiple releases be proposed, or new countries join the project. National teams will be able to adapt the model to different cultural values and socio-political contexts, while being aligned with the model's commitments and with the project's values of excellence, evidence-based decision-making, and openness.

How will the model be implemented?

The model's operationalisation will need to be adapted to local contexts to ensure that implementation of the model's commitments is appropriate to the socio-economic conditions of a given community, their cultural values and belief systems, as well as the natural environment they live in. The implementation of the model will also be informed by the specifics of the research activities for which agreement is being sought, including relevant field entomology data from the areas around the work site. However, it is important that there is consistency in the approach and that in all contexts the outcome of decision-making is considered legitimate.

Supporting operationalisation with 13 commitments

To enable consistency across the project, the model sets out 13 commitments that Target Malaria undertakes to implement, and which will help guide operationalisation of the model.

These commitments are grouped into 5 key thematic areas:

- **Defining communities:** Defining who is considered to be part of the community that will take part in the decision-making process is essential to ensure the decision's legitimacy, yet it can be complex. The community and the project must agree to the community's boundaries and work jointly to delineate them.
- **Information and verification of understanding:** Decision-making must be informed in order to be meaningful. Information should be shared in a way that meets the communities' needs. The project has a duty to share information about current activities and its ultimate research objectives transparently.
- **Consultation and community agreement:** While it is the affected community that will make a decision, the project encourages input from inter-disciplinary experts on the process and is committed to sharing its approach widely with other stakeholders. The project also commits to documenting the consultation and decision-making process to support transparency and accountability.
- **Monitoring the implementation of the agreement:** If an agreement to proceed is reached with the community, the project will agree on a monitoring process with that community in order to document implementation of the agreement.
- **Dissenting voices and minority perspectives:** It is rare that every single person in a community agrees with all decisions taken on behalf of the group. Dissenting voices and minority perspectives need to be acknowledged and accounted for, while respecting the community's decision. The project is committed to engaging with these perspectives and to continually assess whether the validity of the community's decision should be re-assessed.

How was the model developed?

Target Malaria has always sought agreement for key research activities, either in the form of individual consent — requested for activities involving an individual or specific household, or as community agreement — sought for activities that take place in common spaces in the community. This community agreement model is based on lessons learned from past approaches and takes into account the specificities of the project's next phase of work.

Our community agreement model builds on prior stakeholder engagement frameworks used by the project and was developed over two years of consultation and review with Target Malaria project members and external inter-disciplinary experts. This process involved several separate stages, including:

- Consultative workshops with African experts in community and stakeholder engagement to establish some of the core concepts that needed to inform the new model and key areas to further explore.
- Individual interviews with external experts to gather feedback and input on key topics, to understand what could be learned from other projects and what Target Malaria could do to improve its approach.

- Internal workshops with Target Malaria stakeholder engagement teams at both the national and global level to take these inputs into account and articulate a specific set of commitments.

These commitments were then reviewed by the project's leadership and by its Ethics Advisory Committee, taking into account recommendations and guidance from international and national bodies.

Target Malaria aims to achieve excellence in all areas of our work, creating a path for responsible research and co-development of genetic technologies, such as gene drive, to fight malaria.

