

The private sector's role in malaria surveillance

KEY MESSAGES

- It is important to engage private sector stakeholders early in the development of malaria elimination strategies.
- Conducting a baseline survey of the private sector is critical to understanding the composition of the private sector in a specific setting, its size, geographical distribution and quality of services.
- Facilitating reporting, referral, and training linkages between the public and private sectors and making malaria a notifiable disease are simple strategies to improve private sector involvement in malaria surveillance.
- The private sector is a diverse and often unaffiliated group of providers that can be organized and better engaged through social franchising, effective regulation, professional organizations and government outreach.

WHO IS THE PRIVATE SECTOR?

The private health sector includes any outlet, facility or person that provides clinical or diagnostic services and is not managed by a national or local government. The specific composition of the private health sector varies greatly across countries but can generally be organized into four groups (see [Figure 1](#)).

Formal providers are often easier to include in national malaria surveillance systems because they are regulated by the government and are typically required to submit records of their services. In contrast, the informal sector may be more difficult to include because of a lack of regulation or enforcement, making it difficult to obtain records in a timely and coordinated manner.

The size, makeup and contribution of the private sector vary from country to country. In some regions such as

Southeast Asia the private sector is the primary source of healthcare, providing more than half of preventive and curative care. In others such as Latin America and Southern Africa, the public sector dominates the health system and provides most healthcare services.

WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES IN ENGAGING THE PRIVATE SECTOR?

The primary challenges faced by malaria programs are:

- Private providers are often excluded from the design, planning and implementation of public sector disease programs.
- The goals of the national malaria programs and private providers may differ as private providers are often primarily motivated by profit.

Figure 1. Private sector matrix

| | For-profit provider Profit-driven and entrepreneurial | Nonprofit provider Mission-driven |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Formal provider Providers who are formally trained and whose clinical practice is regulated by the government, thus records are more easily obtained and regulations more easily enforced | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Private hospitals and clinics • Pharmacies and registered or accredited drug dispensaries • Large companies that provide healthcare to their workers • Private diagnostic facilities and laboratories | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • NGOs and NGO-operated health facilities • Faith-based and charity hospitals, clinics and other health facilities |
| Informal provider Providers who may not have received formal training and who are not registered with or licensed by any government body, thus records are more difficult to obtain and regulations are more difficult to enforce | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unregistered or unaccredited drug sellers • Public and private practitioners working from home • Village doctors and traditional healers • Unregulated small mining and agricultural companies that provide healthcare to their workers | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Volunteer health workers |

- The informal private sector is particularly difficult to address due to its size, lack of organization and lack of government engagement.
- Many private providers do not recognize the value and importance of counting and reporting all malaria cases and are usually not incentivized to do so.
- A large proportion of private providers have only limited training in accurate diagnosis, prescribing and reporting.
- New regulations and protocols may not be communicated to all private providers, and providers may choose to not follow current regulations and protocols.

Understanding how to effectively address these challenges is key to ensure appropriate private sector engagement. While some strategies have been shown to be effective in multiple settings, the approaches countries use will be highly context-specific.

RECOMMENDATIONS

National malaria programs and ministries of health need to develop strategies for engaging the private sector in malaria elimination. Below are some general approaches that can be used:

- Conduct a landscaping effort to understand the breadth and quality of private sector diagnosis, treatment and reporting of malaria cases.
- For countries approaching malaria elimination, make malaria a notifiable disease.

- Provide simple and inexpensive reporting and referral systems for the private sector.
- Where feasible, facilitate linkages and routine interaction between the national malaria program, public providers and private providers.
- Determine appropriate and effective incentives and disincentives for private providers.
- Invest in schemes to provide opportunities for accreditation of informal private providers.
- Ensure frequent trainings of private providers.
- Utilize a strong intermediary presence between the public and private sectors such as a large NGO.
- Map out areas where the private sector is the predominant source of care for high risk groups and provide direct support in these areas.

Numerous opportunities exist to address private sector engagement in malaria diagnosis, treatment, and reporting, but strategies need to be tailored to each country's unique political, economic and epidemiologic context. Knowledge sharing between countries and collaborations that include private sector healthcare providers is essential for building consensus on effective approaches. There is substantial awareness among ministries of health and malaria program managers that private providers in many settings are already doing much of this work effectively, but improved efforts to include them in formal national processes are crucial to achieving and maintaining malaria elimination.