When Regina Rabinovich, MD, PhD, took over as Director of the PATH Malaria Vaccine Initiative (MVI) in 2000, more than one million children every year were dying from this preventable and treatable disease. Now over a decade later, mortality rates are down by half. But the child who dies every minute from malaria is just the tip of the iceberg. "There is a huge pool of asymptomatic infection," she said recently, as well as increasing drug resistance, a toxic mix that increases the risks for malaria resurgence. Even insecticide-treated bednets (ITBs) are imperfect. Measured improvements in malaria mortality, said Rabinovich, are thanks to intensive efforts and funding from organizations like the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, which recently pledged to provide $12 billion over the next three years. But risks and challenges remain, and there is a desperate need for creative innovation and improved governance for malaria control.

Rabinovich was speaking on December 4 to a packed roundtable luncheon audience as part of the Harvard Global Health Institute’s "Informal Conversations." The Informal Conversation series offers faculty and students the opportunity to engage in dialogue on cutting-edge, cross-disciplinary issues.

Rabinovich realized the governance gap during her work as Director of the Infectious Disease Unit at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, where she oversaw the development and implementation of strategies for disease prevention, treatment, and control particularly relevant to global health. "I saw a lack of unified strategies," she recalls, "and governments did not even know what was happening in their own country. Seven of the top countries facing a rise in malaria cases lack adequate data collection and for other areas we have no data at all." She also noted a disconnect between the World Health Organization’s malaria guidelines and what was really happening in national program development.

Encouraged by the model of the 2005 What Works Working Group case studies produced by the Center for Global Development), Rabinovich telephoned the working group members to ask what they had learned about governance for health that might help shape policy and action on malaria. "We didn’t ask that question," they told Rabinovich, so she decided to explore it herself. Choosing three critical areas for framework development—supply chain management, country coordination models, and advocacy and funding—she conducted nearly 70 interviews to help
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her understand more about where (and how) improving governance issues could improve malaria responses over the next decade. The goal, she says, is to create a framework for action that will prevent malaria from debilitating the millions around the world who remain at risk.

Borders matter in malaria control. The border between Namibia and Angola is a prime example, said luncheon participant Eliza Petrow, Director of International Programs at the JC. Flowers Foundation. While parasites can cross the national divides without a passport, her foundation’s efforts to share drugs and bednets across the Namibian border into Angola required elaborate official negotiations. Even then, Petrow told the group, “We were always stopped at the border—all the paperwork could not get us through.” As a result one country’s high risk of malaria persist—and stymie—its neighbors’ eradication efforts.

Dr. Harvey V. Fineberg, President of the Institute of Medicine, asked Rabinovich what basic ingredients are needed for an effective improvement in malaria governance. “Have a well–elucidated problem set, solution set, and engage the leadership,” she said.

Improving malaria governance, she explained, calls for distributive models of leadership, more intentional integration of research with treatment, agile programs that can adapt to geographic variations, and recognition of cross-sectoral interdependence across the health– and non–health sectors. For example, she noted, poverty reduction efforts, agriculture, finance, education, industry, and the private sector can all join voices to make a difference.

"Who sets the agenda for a new governance framework?" asked discussion moderator, Dr. Suerie Moon; Moon is Research Director and Co–Chair of the Forum on Global Governance for Health at HGHI and the Harvard School of Public Health (HSPH), and Co–Director of the Project on Innovation and Access to Technologies for Sustainable Development in the Sustainability Science Program at the Harvard Kennedy School. Rabinovich focused her response on the need for more local engagement.

"The role of civil society in delivery—and here I would include faith–based organizations (FBOs) at the community level—is huge," she said. In Nigeria, for example, over 50 percent of malaria action is shaped by the private sector. And local public governance needs much more support. While WHO guidance touches national and often regional levels, the practical agenda starts to fall apart, she added, at the level of district, state, or agencies.

Informed leadership is key. The African Leaders Malaria Alliance (ALMA), for example, launched through the World Bank at the request of country leaders themselves, is a spare and effective NGO that produces malaria scorecards for each country and brings together heads of state to discuss the scores together with their peers. The results make visible existing gaps and foster accountability and action.

Most malaria victims die in Africa, but let’s not forget that Africa is a continent made up of 53 very different countries, said Dr. Glaudine Mtshali, HGHI Executive Director. In South Africa, for example, regional infrastructure has specific processes that work, and might serve as models for other regions, and other nations. "Initiatives afoot at the local level give us reason for hope," said Mtshali.
Rabinovich agreed. "I'm an optimist," she concluded.

Learn more:

"Combating Malaria," a special report from the Financial Times
(4/25/13)

Defeating Malaria: From the Genes to the Globe Initiative
"Rethinking R&D in the New Era of Malaria Eradication" (Harvard Malaria Forum event, 10/22/13)
"Thwarting Killer Mosquitos" (The Forum, Harvard School of Public Health, 5/1/13)

Photo courtesy of Regina Rabinovich