

By Lieut. Gen. Louis Lillywhite, Oriole Global Health advisor

OGH has been centrally involved in supporting the UK-Aid funded Ascend (Accelerating the Sustainable Control and Elimination of Neglected Tropical Diseases) programme response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Ascend is a programme targeting five neglected tropical diseases (NTDs) across 11 countries funded by the UK Foreign commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) and delivered by a consortium of partners including Crown.

Following the outbreak of COVID-19, early guidance from WHO, anticipating a reflection of the high mortality rates in China and Italy, was to suspend all community based NTD control activities.



Shipments of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) arrive in Ethiopia

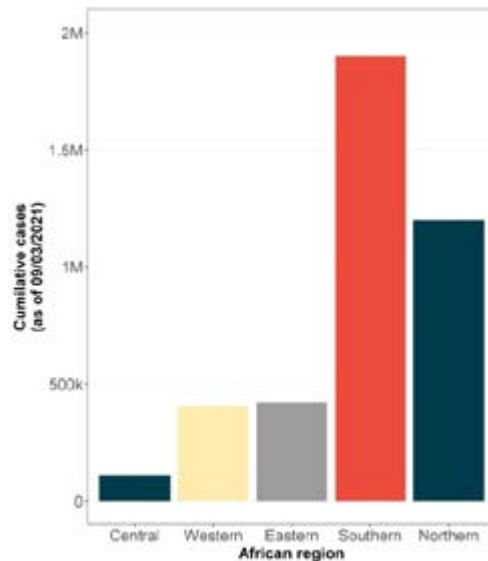


Fig.1 Covid cases in Africa by region, as of 9 March 2021

However, after months of 'watchful waiting', it appeared that significantly lower rates of infection, and associated mortality were seen in the West, Central and Eastern African region than elsewhere (figure 1). While the reasons behind this are not yet clear, it could be attributed to a rapid and early response to the pandemic across the region, with the introduction of a range of measures coordinated by distinctive emergency task forces, including school closures, targeted behaviour change and communication (BCC) campaigns, mask-wearing mandates and national or regional lockdowns.

As the nature of the pandemic became clear, and once the initial preparedness and outbreak responses in countries were defined and set-up, and as the nature of the pandemic became clear, ministries of health expressed interest in restarting their NTD programmes.

Together with partners, OGH has been supporting the safe delivery of these NTD programmes [2], and ensuring progress towards the WHO NTD 2030 roadmap is maintained [3].

Reinstating NTD programmes meant Ascend country leads needed to understand key blockages to programming resulting from COVID-19 policies, such as school closures and travel restrictions, that would need to be adapted to before resuming activities. This was made possible through ongoing collaboration with partner governments and WHO country offices, with the Ascend team then working to ensure the health and safety of those involved in programme delivery and those receiving NTD services financed with FCDO funding, while supporting partner government decision-making and, ultimately, implementation of an adapted NTD programme.

Following several months of adapted implementation of both retargeted activities and NTD implementation, Ascend lot 1 has had the opportunity to reflect on learnings through structured sessions in the African and Asian regions to gather country feedback on the response.

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