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Gaining access to prompt and appropriate malaria treatment in the Kilombero Valley, Tanzania: A health social science perspective

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Despite all efforts, malaria remains a major problem in Africa particularly among children under five years of age and pregnant mothers. In Tanzania, malaria is believed to be directly or indirectly responsible for about 16 million annual malaria episodes and 100,000-125,000 annual deaths of which 70-80,000 are children under five (MOH, 2002). Global and national malaria control strategies have mainly relied on low cost interventions through improved prevention and effective treatment, with the aim of reducing malaria related deaths. However, in many places, people still lack access to effective treatment due to various interrelated factors.

The proposed study is conducted within the frame of the ACCESS Programme, a five year programme which intends to improve access to effective malaria treatment in the districts of Kilombero and Ulanga, Tanzania. The study aims at understanding local knowledge of malaria and factors that positively or negatively influence whether care takers of under five year old children are able to gain access to prompt and appropriate malaria treatment.

In a setting of high malaria endemicity, illness episodes with fever and/or convulsions are very likely to be caused by malaria parasites. The local people use different terms for these conditions. The first task of this research project was to carry out a household study to examine local illness concepts which are related to malaria and to investigate associated health seeking practices (baseline study). These findings were fed into an extended social marketing campaign which drew on local illness concepts to raise awareness of danger symptoms and biomedically appropriate treatment. The household study was then repeated to find out whether the social marketing campaign had changed people's knowledge and treatment seeking practices.

The research project further provides a deeper understanding of access to malaria treatment in the research area. The general environment and service of selected health facilities is explored in order to learn how children with fever and convulsions (*degedege*) are attended. However, the focus is not only on household and health facility levels. The last part of the study focuses on services offered by non governmental and community organizations that are active in the research area. The project investigates whether these services assist those most at risk, pregnant women and children, in accessing various preventive and health care services.