

Malaria Eradication Scientific Alliance (MESA) kick-off meeting Sitges, Spain, 28-29 May 2012

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The Malaria Eradication Scientific Alliance (MESA) meeting (May 28th and 29th 2012), meant the official launch of the alliance, the formation of the MESA Strategic Advisory Council and the first MESA working group meetings. With the participation of representatives of funding bodies and PDPs (product development partnerships) as well as members of the research community, the meeting also served as a forum on research portfolios and research strategies for malaria eradication.

In brief, MESA was conceived as a meeting place for the community to collaborate on the science of malaria eradication and as a catalyst for priority research projects of the highest standard. Participants discussed the functions of MESA in depth:

- Provide an incubator of ideas for the science of malaria eradication
- Collaborate with the malaria community to track progress in research driven by the malaria eradication goal including:
 - investments (in collaboration with Policy Cures)
 - projects and emerging results (knowledge management function)
- Provide knowledge management on the science of malaria eradication
- Monitor activities, identify knowledge gaps, articulate priority research questions, catalyze activities and report on progress across the field
- Capture and systematize information from operational experiences with respect to specific interventions/approaches driven by malaria elimination, create a novel evidence base ('from anecdote to evidence') and articulate gaps in the evidence base
- Catalyze progress by endorsing funding of research projects and providing grants in under-investigated areas
- Maintain an updated malaria eradication R&D agenda

MESA's catalytic role

With respect to funding research projects the function of MESA is to work in collaboration with the community to identify priorities such that investments are strategic, responsive to needs and synergistic with the existing funding landscape.

Discussion on MESA's catalytic role highlighted:

- Multiple funding streams for malaria eradication research are necessary and MESA's role is to boost areas which are underfunded and/or outside the remit of other funding streams.

- Periodic revision of priorities taking on board emerging data is crucial. MESA must ensure that its grants are agile and responsive to developments.

Other discussion points on MESA included:

- Establish a dialogue with PDPs to track progress in developing tools with target product profiles (TPPs) pertinent to malaria eradication.
- Establish a mechanism to updating the R&D agenda and revise priorities.
- Define and monitor milestones and timeframes to track progress and identify where strategic research investments can be made to accelerate progress.
- Identify and engage with all pertinent stakeholders (including, private sector, national malaria programmes and research institutions in endemic countries) so that malaria eradication science responds to the real needs of the community.
- Contribute to the revision of the Roll Back Malaria (RBM) Global Malaria Action Plan (2013-14) such that the updated malaria eradication research agenda is included.
- Align agendas with agencies including RBM and the Global Fund to fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria.
- Keep conscious of the complex global health architecture and the role of MESA within this context.
- Address the education and training component of malaria eradication science.

Discussion identified scientific topics for consideration by MESA including:

- Strategies to deal with the problem of drug resistance, beyond the current combination approach (ie. screening for resistance induction at the discovery level before the election of clinical candidates).
- Genomics approaches to understand population dynamics.
- Developing innovative new tools for eradication is equally important as testing novel ways of using existing tools for elimination purposes.
- Stratification exercises: what strategy and mix of tools would be best suited for each setting, and when they would be best applied.
- Use of primaquine in malaria eradication.
- Mass drug administration and the use of drugs for blocking transmission at a community level.

MESA working groups

In parallel to the discussions of MESA's role etc, MESA convened working groups (WGs) on two priority areas i.e. measurement of transmission in elimination settings and how to assess health systems' readiness for malaria elimination efforts. These activities build on the malERA (malaria eradication research agenda) consultation which identified these areas as cross-cutting issues. The objective of these WG meetings was to provide MESA with expert opinion and recommendations regarding the forthcoming call for proposals to be launched later in 2012. Further working groups will be convened to address other specific issues in the future.

Health systems' readiness

The MESA WG specifically addressed research questions regarding: system levels, system building blocks and geographical considerations. A tool (or tools) is needed to assess the systems' readiness for embarking on malaria elimination. Research needs to address the determination of the minimal requirements for eliminating malaria in specific settings and then assess feasibility in the actual conditions of different health systems. The MESA WG for health systems readiness recommended that the call for proposals is open to projects which:

- Develop and partly validate structured approaches to establish the minimal essential needs, feasibility and systems readiness for malaria elimination in endemic countries (extended feasibility study).
- Establish structured approaches to understand where efficacy of interventions is lost (from efficacy to effectiveness or 'efficacy decay analysis').

Measurement of transmission

The MESA WG for measurement of transmission recommended three specific issues for the call for proposals to address:

- Areas with multi-species of the parasites and vectors.
- Accuracy of measurement at high and low transmission.
- Practical method(s) for routinely measuring transmission at different geographical areas.

(For further details, see the WG presentation summaries).

Next steps

Activities

- Hire the MESA Project Officer based at WHO Global Malaria Programme
- Launch the call for proposals for funding research projects on health systems' readiness and measurement of transmission
- Establish a cost estimate working group in collaboration with Policy Cures

Reporting on progress

- Congresses:
 - International Congress for Tropical Medicine and Malaria, Rio de Janeiro (September, 2012)
 - Challenges in Malaria Research, Basel (October, 2012)
 - ASTMH, Atlanta (November 2012)
- MESA web page (late 2012)
- Investment analysis report in collaboration with Policy Cures (2013)
- Scientific meeting 'The science of malaria eradication'
- Feedback from the projects supported by MESA grants