For Mfaume Hemedi the problem of medicinal stock-outs in Tanzania is all too familiar. As anti-malaria co-ordinator on the council of the Lindi Rural district, one of the poorest regions in the country, he has faced an uphill battle to ensure sufferers of the disease have access to drugs.

Supply chain inefficiency, a result of poor stock control and forecasting of anti-malarial drugs at all levels of government, has meant that local health facilities frequently run out of medicines, he says.

But in 2009, he was given a helping hand. Spotting an opportunity to reduce the number of stock-outs in Tanzania, Jim Barrington, the former chief information officer of Swiss pharmaceutical company Novartis, launched the SMS for Life programme to monitor the levels of anti-malarial drugs at local health centres and re-distribute medicines where necessary.

In a country where there are 60,000 malaria deaths a year, 80% of which are among children under five, according to the President’s Malaria Initiative - a US government programme - the availability of drugs is vital in combating a disease that is curable if treated within the first 24 hours.

"If a child gets ill in the evening and you have to wait until the next day, there’s already been a delay and if the health facility you go to doesn’t have the medicine you need, you only have a few options. You can walk to another town or buy medicine if you have the money,” says Barrington.

The premise of SMS for Life was simple but the results impressive. Leveraging its contacts, Novartis assembled a cast of public and private actors that included IBM, Vodafone, the Tanzanian Ministry of Health and the Roll Back Malaria campaign to launch a 21-week pilot project in three of Tanzania’s districts to monitor drug levels.

Using mobile phones and electronic mapping technology designed by Vodafone, local health workers sent weekly text messages to district health facilities to update them on
their inventories, allowing drugs to be re-distributed.

By the end of the pilot, the number of health facilities without one or more anti-malarial medicines fell to 26% from 78% in week one. In Hemedi’s district, stock-outs were eliminated by week eight. The programme’s success means it is now being rolled out across Tanzania and will enlarge to track drugs for leprosy and tuberculosis in September.

SMS for Life is the type of innovative public-private partnership that has bolstered the case for businesses to get involved in fighting diseases such as malaria.

"Traditionally the UN would’ve said can you write a cheque or can you make certain donations but now there has been a clear acknowledgement by governments that they are not going to meet the Millennium Development Goals alone," says Natalie Africa, the programme manager for Business Call to Action, which aims to accelerate progress towards the MDGs by enlisting companies to develop business models that have both social and financial dividends.

Africa stresses the importance of the commercial nature of these ventures to ensure their long-term sustainability and says businesses can provide the technology, skills and innovation necessary to reach the MDGs: "The private sector is just one component in society and not involving them would be like working with one leg."

Others acknowledge that corporations can leverage their distribution networks as well as project management and logistical skills to ensure products from drugs to mosquito nets arrive in hard-to-reach villages. Their large geographical footprints also mean companies usually have experience in scaling up and replicating projects.

This has certainly been the case for Standard Chartered Bank, which has a heavy presence in Africa. The bank launched its ‘Nets for Life’ programme in Zambia in 2006 and has since teamed up with local health ministries and other partners to distribute 6.4 million long-lasting insecticide-treated nets in 14 other African countries.

Gavin Laws, group head of corporate affairs at the bank, says it makes good business sense to tackle a disease like malaria. Absenteeism due to sickness, a slump in productivity and an increased healthcare bill for employees are all reasons for companies in infected areas to join the battle.

"Ultimately, our business is only as strong as the communities in which we operate, so by ensuring the health of our communities, we also ensure the health – and sustainability – of our business," says Laws.

The bank’s involvement has also added a business dimension to the ‘Nets for Life’ programme: Laws says that Standard Chartered ensures a robust governance structure and that "funding is spent to bring maximum return on investment."

Prudence Smith, a spokeswoman on malaria for the World Health Organisation, says that while mistrust of corporate motivations meant the organisation was reluctant to collaborate with businesses for many years, it was now generally agreed that PPPs were a "win-win".

Smith says working with companies provides the public sector with a valuable insight into their business models: "More and more we are realising that there's a huge amount of money to be mobilised as well as expertise, business acumen and knowledge on the ground. Their understanding of health can help us. It's a quid pro quo."

Barrington too speaks plainly about the motivations behind the companies involved in
SMS for Life. Under the scheme, Vodafone committed to developing and supplying the software for the duration of the pilot with the understanding that it would charge commercial rates if the project was rolled out. Similarly Novartis, a major producer of anti-malarial medicines, benefits from knowing its supplies are reaching its customers in Tanzania and from potentially winning new business in other African countries.

Despite the push for greater engagement with the private sector in international health development, Sabha Sobhani, a programme manager at the United Nations Development Programme’s Growing Inclusive Markets Initiative, says that corporate involvement should not be oversold. "Alone, business is not a panacea for social change," he says. Instead, Sobhani believes that companies need to be part of an ecosystem that includes governments and non-profits with each bringing their unique skillset to the table.

Back in Tanzania, Barrington is busy training health workers as part of SMS for Life's roll-out and is in talks to launch similar programmes in Ghana, Kenya and the Democratic Republic of Congo. "It's a project that has given me the greatest satisfaction in my whole career," he says.

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