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Healthy Lives Mean Smarter Kids, Period

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In order for us to get a clearer picture of the phenomenon and deliver effective and concrete solutions, we have to widen our lens and look at an element often left out of the malaria conversation: education.

Take a quick look and you may think the effects of malaria on education and vice versa are not apparent, but dig a bit deeper and you will see that these neighbours in the development discussion are not mutually

exclusive, and missing this link would surely be a mistake, especially in the current climate as we transition from the United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) to establish the post-2015 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Let's start at the beginning.

A smart child starts with a healthy womb, and the first step to allowing children to reach their full potential when they eventually reach the classroom is ensuring the health and wellbeing of their carrying-mothers. Prevention is key, yet almost 15 million pregnant women in Africa remain without access to preventive treatments for malaria.

Mothers infected during pregnancy can cause anaemia and reduce "in utero" nutrition in their babies, which has shown to decrease neurocognitive function in new-borns and lead to lower levels of educational attainment along the line.

These long-lasting effects make one thing clear: maternal health is a precondition to a child's future ability to advance through the education system, and achieving this starts with preventing mothers and new-borns from contracting malaria, among other diseases.

Few are aware that the education system itself is one of the greatest victims of malaria.

In endemic countries, born healthy or not, once a child reaches school, they still run the risk of being exposed to malaria, which could then lead to poor school attendance and class performance.

Education cannot thrive in these regions as long as malaria is in the equation: according to the World Bank, malaria leads to 50 per cent of all preventable absenteeism in Africa. How can we expect an educated, invigorated and engaged young population if they are not healthy? Put this together with teachers home sick with malaria and subsequent school closures, and you've lost 4-10million school days per year.

On the flip side, evidence suggests that initiatives aiming to control malaria have positive educational outcomes.

A recent study by researchers from the Paris School of Economics looked at the impact of malaria control campaigns and found that in all sub-Saharan African countries analysed, these campaigns positively affected the number of school years completed. Malaria prevention programs are not only helping to save lives, but they are serving as a cost-effective way of boosting a child's education.

Just as addressing malaria can improve education, so too can increasing access to education help to combat malaria.

A 2014 UNESCO Global Monitoring Report argued that access to education is crucial in ensuring malaria prevention measures, such as the use of bed nets treated with insecticide, are effective. It found that the odds of children contracting malaria are estimated to be more than a third less if their mother completed secondary education.

Certainly, when the head of the household is taught how to take preventative measures towards malaria it can lead to positive results for the whole family, but education on malaria is just as crucial outside the home. Schools are not only essential institutions for teaching children about malaria prevention practices and healthy living, but they are also an effective and beneficial gateway for reaching the wider community, as these learned behaviour patterns are shared and carried on into adulthood.

Healthier and more educated parents lead to children living longer and smarter lives. Looking ahead as we reach the United Nations SDGs, we have the opportunity to evolve on how we view malaria and education for our children and years to come, but this will require commitment and understanding: commitment to supporting malaria initiatives and understanding that malaria and education are not separate concepts, but two of the same. Investing in malaria is investing in education.

Taking these steps will not only prevent lives being lost, school absenteeism, and detrimental reparative costs to the economy, to name a few, but it will lead to stronger and more attentive pupils and a next generation of better equipped parents.

Don't we owe that to our children?