

Independent Evaluation Summary and Response

August 2020



MALARIA
FREE MEKONG

A Platform of NGOs



**Regional Malaria
Civil Society Organisation
Platform, GMS**

Hosted by,



Independent Evaluation

Summary and Response Document

Regional Malaria Civil Society Organization, Platform

August 2020

Background to the Evaluation

The Regional Malaria Civil Society Organisation Platform in the Greater Mekong Sub-region (the Platform) is a network of civil society organisations (CSOs) and communities from the Global Fund Regional Artemisinin-Resistance Initiative (RAI) implementing countries: Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam. The Platform was established in 2014 to connect malaria-affected communities and civil society project implementers to policy-makers and donors through the RAI Regional Steering Committee (RSC). Its goal is to contribute to malaria elimination effort in the Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS), by:

1. **Facilitating meaningful coordination and partnership** between civil society organisations and other key malaria actors including donors, governments, academia and other key stakeholders;
2. **Advocating** for enabling policy, strategies, and plans that respect the rights of all communities and include support for community-based services in the GMS; and
3. **Strengthening capacity** of civil society actors by facilitating peer learning through leveraging the strengths of implementing and other technical partners.

The Platform has been partially funded by RAI from 2014-2017 under the RAI RSC secretariat, platform start receiving Global Fund grant under RAI2E from 2018-2020 and will receive continued support from RAI3 for 2021-2023. In order to assess the Platform's performance to date and to identify opportunities for further improvement and impact going forward, an independent evaluation of the Platform was commissioned in early 2020, which also explored issues raised by the RSC's Independent Monitoring Panel (IMP) report in 2019. This document presents a summary of the external evaluator's report, as well as the Platform's reflections and action plan in response to it.

Methodology & Limitations

Following a competitive process, a Bangkok-based research firm, SUPA71, was contracted to carry out the evaluation, which adopted a mixed-methods approach consisting of:

1. Desk **review and observation** of meetings;
2. Quantitative **online survey** targeting the Platform's CSO members to gauge their attitudes towards the Platform's role, activities and governance. 34 out of 63 invited participants responded;
3. Qualitative **Key Informant Interviews** (KII) with 19 stakeholders, including representatives from the National Malaria Control Programs (NMCPs), Country Coordination Mechanism (CCM), the IMP, RSC, RSC Secretariat, Global Fund Secretariat, RAI Principal Recipient, and CSO partners, including the RSC representatives and the Platform country focal points.

While some robust data was collected, the evaluator acknowledged that the low response rate on the survey was a limitation. In addition, the Platform was concerned that the evaluation was also limited by the following factors, which should be considered in the design of any subsequent evaluations of the Platform:

- Imbalanced participation in the KIIs, e.g. under-representation of NMCPs;
- Insufficient triangulation and analysis of the quantitative with the qualitative data;
- Not disaggregating responses by national and international CSOs within the Platform;
- The lack of detail in the evaluator's recommendations to provide clearer guidance for next steps.

Findings, Conclusions & Platform Reflections

The evaluation served as a useful external confirmation of the Platform's self-assessment of its performance, and provided further insight into stakeholder perceptions, highlighting what is working, where the gaps are, what partners are concerned about, as well as identifying opportunities. The evaluation concludes that the CSO Platform is necessary, and that it is playing its intended role, but that there is room to improve its effectiveness. This section outlines the evaluation's key findings and conclusions, and the Platform's own reflections.

- 1. NMCP/CCM engagement with CSOs:** Half of the survey respondents agree that *"The Platform is an effective mechanism to achieve better engagement of CSOs with NMCPs and the CCM through information sharing, coordination, and advocacy at the country and regional levels,"* and most respondents were "neutral", indicating that improvement is needed. The Platform – and civil society in general – need to improve the NMCPs' trust in CSOs in order to recognise the unique value of their contribution to malaria elimination, which may then increase the prioritisation that NMCPs currently give CSOs. Currently, there is some concern that CSOs are perceived as competing with governments for scarce resources rather than complementing NMCP service delivery, which may reduce the government's willingness to cooperate with CSOs and support the Platform. Strengthening this trust will require the Platform to support CSOs to be reliable, transparent and effective implementers and communicators.

- 2. Influence at the regional and country level:**

The majority of survey respondents agree that *"The Platform's role at the regional level is well recognised, especially in advocacy, information sharing"*. The perception of its role at the country level is mixed, however, and while there is growing recognition of the Platform's role in supporting in-country NMCP and CSO activities, in some countries, country level coordination and advocacy needs to improve, with more clarity needed on the Platform's roles.



RAI RSC CSO representatives sharing feedback from the community at the 14th RAI RSC meeting in Yangon Myanmar

- 3. Advocacy effectiveness:** The evaluation found that the Platform plays an effective role in coordination, documenting evidence of good practices and challenges in RAI implementation and using evidence to advocate around gaps at the national and regional level. As with influence, advocacy success was more clearly identified at the regional level, and this is partly attributed to having at least one CSO Representative to the RSC who is independent and not representing a RAI-funding recipient. Having a representative without any real or perceived conflicts of interest is highly valued by stakeholders. The Platform agrees with

the evaluator's finding that, *"The effectiveness of the Platform's advocacy work is more noticeable at the regional, and opportunities exist to grow its effectiveness at the country level."*



Workshop to develop CSO platform advocacy plan for 2018-2020



4. Effectiveness of Platform-facilitated consultations:

The main objectives of the consultations are to enable CSO representatives to share information on what is or is not working, what needs to be improved, and to develop clear, evidence-based messages to advocate effectively to the RSC. While the regional and country CSO consultation meetings are considered to be useful opportunities for achieving these objectives, steering committee members are challenged by the limited time to prepare, which can also impact outcomes. The Platform will also need to balance using these meetings to further engage with NMCPs, while also maintaining a “safe-space” for CSOs to openly discuss the challenges they face.



Malaria workers discussing their priority for the RAI3 grant in Vietnam during national CSO consultation



Community consultation during one of the field visit in Myanmar

RAI funding requests and implementation planning, particularly addressing the needs of mobile and migrant populations, ethnic communities, and people living in remote areas. It is also observed that the representation and engagement with communities can vary between CSOs – particularly between national and international NGOs – and that the role of the Platform at the country level contributes to learning and coordination of support among diverse CSOs.

5. The Platform and CSOs’ engagement with malaria-affected communities: The evaluation found that “the Platform is able to effectively engage with the disease-affected communities in RAI funded programme” through its ongoing involvement with implementing CSOs, and directly engaging affected community through national consultation meetings, field visits, and network building activities. This engagement is contributing to developing community-based systems and resilience by reflecting the realities and needs of malaria workers and volunteers in



Village Malaria Worker contributing to the GF RAI3 funding request development in Cambodai, January 2020

6. Effectiveness of CSO training activities:

While the evaluation found that “The CSO Platform provided capacity development and mentorship training and... has been effective in identifying the capacity needs of CSOs and organising relevant capacity building initiatives for CSO Partners”, the Platform itself has faced challenges in this area. Developing curriculum for such a diverse group of partners with varying experiences and capacity makes it difficult to formulate curricula that responds to each member’s priorities, and the fact that training is provided in English limits both who can participate, and the depth of their engagement in discussion. No practical, affordable solution has been



Training participants learning in the field, Aug 2019

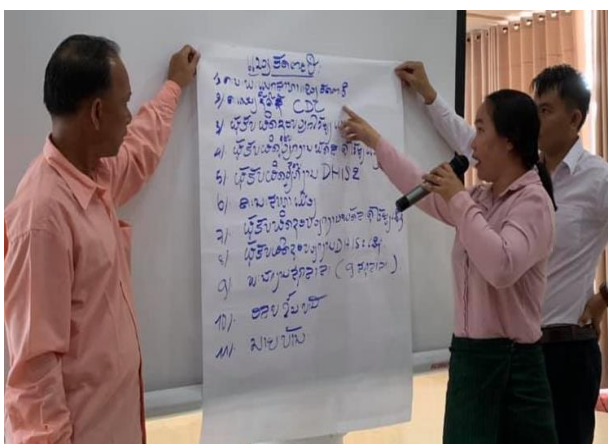
found to translate training sessions into five languages, and there are concerns about the efficacy of cascading training from the regional, to the national, to the field level, largely due to the resources and time required that have not been planned for.

7. Effectiveness of cross learning and field visits: Half of the respondents agreed that the Platform is “*effective in facilitating peer-learning among the CSO Partners*”, and while the cross-partner field visits are considered useful for the participants, the lessons are rarely shared more widely when participants return to their country. However, the visits have been essential for the RAI RSC CSO Representatives to collect first-hand information and understand the experience of malaria workers and the situation in the field by engaging directly with community members and local health authorities. While the evaluation recommends that



Community consultation during one of the field visit in Laos.

The Platform agrees with the recommendation that more personal communication needs to be used to increase engagement, e.g. phone calls with focal points, and messenger apps, and it will explore the suggestion for more frequent meetings between country CSO Platform focal points and community representatives to see if the time and cost will be justified by the potential benefits.



Community network discussing their communication strategy at the community level, Laos May 2019

these visits should continue, the Platform needs to rethink their design and follow-up to ensure that their benefits in terms of reflection, collecting evidence for advocacy, and sharing experiences on implementing best practices, are more accessible to more stakeholders.

8. Effectiveness of communication services: Among the different communication channels used by the Platform, “*Email, Platform’s Facebook page and website are the most effective communication channels used by the Platform to communicate and share information*”.



Village malaria workers and CSO staffs joining network meeting in Cambodia, Sep 2019

- 9. Challenges in malaria elimination in the GMS and added value of the Platform or CSOs in addressing malaria:** The evaluation's qualitative data identified the key challenges facing malaria elimination to be drug resistance in some border areas, legal barriers preventing CSOs and community volunteers from providing malaria test and treatment services in some countries, and the challenges in delivering services in remote areas.



Construction are near Thai-Myanmar border, where significant number of migrant workers were working. Photo taken during the field visit



Forest workers temporary shelter, Cambodia 2019

The evaluation also noted that some see the Platform's CSO partners as lacking sufficient technical expertise to adequately address key challenges. The Platform's key contribution to addressing challenges in malaria elimination were found to be its advocacy on behalf of malaria-affected communities, particularly the most marginalised and hard-to-reach populations in remote and international border areas.

- 10. Governance mechanism of the CSO Platform and community advocacy:** 85% of survey respondents see the Platform's governance mechanism as effective, but also noted the importance of balancing representation between different countries. Some participants strongly suggested that the Platform expand its mandate to include all CSOs working on malaria, i.e. non-recipients of RAI funding, and perhaps expand it further still to include CSOs advocating for aligned interests, such as universal health coverage.

The CSO Platform's Response

The CSO Platform Secretariat and Technical Advisors reviewed the report in consultation with the IMP. In addition to the evaluation findings, the Platform's own self-reflection resulted in other issues that should be addressed in the next period:

- 1. Acknowledge the diversity within Platform membership:** The evaluation made no mention of the diversity of the Platform's CSO members, which includes grassroots community-based organisations (CBOs), and large international non-governmental organisations (INGOs), some of which work across many GMS countries. These organisations have different capacity and access to resources, which can sometimes create unintended power differentials in meetings, e.g. in terms of confidence to speak up, time available for participation and preparation, English-language skills etc. In theory, this also presents an opportunity for more experienced INGOs to support and mentor CBOs, and for CBOs to keep INGOs rooted to the community. It also needs to be acknowledged that while all CSOs come together in the Platform in a spirit of collaboration, there is also an element of competition, and sometimes the more vocal participants are able to move their agendas more effectively than new, emerging CSOs.

2. **Boost participation:** Just as the evaluation only achieved a 54% response rate in the online survey, the Platform experiences similarly low participation rates in other efforts, e.g. volunteers for key roles, or participation in surveys to identify priorities. This could be a result of poor internet connection in some areas, or the fact that surveys are only sent out in English, and usually to very busy individuals. Further exploration is needed to better understand the nature of these barriers to participation in order to make the Platform more demand-driven.
3. **Expand the Platform's mandate:** Given the Platform's success in elevating the role of civil society and promoting accountability to the intended impact of RAI, there is interest in expanding the Platform's mandate in three potential ways: (1) to include RAI-funded HIV and tuberculosis CSO partners from an accountability perspective, acknowledging that other leaders exist in HIV and TB-related advocacy; (2) to include CSOs working on malaria who are funded by other donors, to strengthen not only accountability, but linkages and coordination across all malaria actors; (3) to include CSOs working on related issues, such as diseases that are increasingly integrated with malaria (e.g. nutrition), or other health issues that share similar community-rooted objectives, such as universal health coverage. In addition, the Platform brings together a large number of health CSOs across five countries, which positions it well to support and coordinate COVID-19 response, and promote best practices. These possibilities require further exploration and discussion by the Platform and its members and stakeholders.
4. **Enhance civil society focus on and capacity in Community Rights and Gender (CRG):** CRG is integrated as a cross-cutting theme across all RAI-funded activities, and the Platform has been advocating for increased attention to these issues. The Platform contributed to strengthening civil society understanding and capacity of CRG during a training workshop in 2019, and will continue to support its members to address rights and gender consistently in their work, and enhance its advocacy on behalf of malaria-affected communities with this lens.
5. **Address resource limitations:** Many of the recommendations from the evaluation will require more resources to address. The Platform has been trying to achieve its mandate with the resources available through the Global Fund, and it has not yet identified ways to overcome some challenges with its present budget. The COVID-19 crisis may present opportunities to move some meetings online, which would not only decrease costs, but offer the potential additional advantages of allowing wider participation, and using multi-language features of some meeting software. However, the larger bottleneck faced by the Platform is its reliance on the goodwill of its Steering Committee members and focal points to consistently work overtime to fulfil their responsibilities. These elected representatives are typically already busy people with full-time jobs, and while the expected time commitment is "only" 20%, in reality, some are finding that at times they need to spend more time to achieve the minimum. Hiring consultants to support focal points in facilitating communication, coordination and logistics at the country level would ease this burden and contribute to greater quality by allowing elected representatives to focus their limited time on strategic content.

Next steps for the Platform

1. **Reflection on the evaluation in the next country, regional and RSC meetings:** Evaluation results will be shared and discussed at upcoming meetings at different levels to reflect on the recommendations, and set commitments for next steps. In particular, as NMCP engagement is a priority for the Platform and its participating CSOs, the Platform Secretariat and country focal points will share relevant evaluation findings with NMCPs and/or CCMs in order to establish more regular engagement, address concerns, strengthen coordination, and build trust.
2. **Seek support from new donors for an expanded Platform mandate:** The Platform can scale-up its role if it receives additional support to do so. The Secretariat will invite donors to observe Platform meetings to understand its unique value proposition in terms of civil society accountability and capacity building, in order to explore the possibility of responsibly expanding its mandate in one or more ways, as outlined above. This will include seeking new resources to improve its current functioning and effectiveness.

- 3. Engage technical experts to advise the Platform:** Two academics with a research background will be invited to join the Platform's advisory team in RAI3 to provide technical support and assistance to the Platform and its members. Terms of reference will be developed shortly.
- 4. Launch the process for the identification of the next CSO Representatives to the RSC:** Following the next election of the Platform's Steering Committee members, the Platform will begin the process of identifying the next CSO Representatives to the RSC, which will again be conducted through an open and transparent process. In accordance with the evaluation's recommendations, effort will be made to ensure that at least one Representative (if not both) comes from an organisation that does not have a financial stake in RAI to avoid any (perceived) conflict of interest. The selection process of the two Representatives will also seek diversity in terms of gender and regional inclusion.

These priorities will evolve as further consultations are carried out. The Platform remains open to suggestions and further discussion. To participate in this ongoing conversation, please contact shreeharia@arcrelief.org

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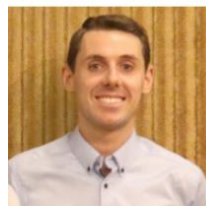


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