

Distributing 4000 Long Lasting Insecticide-Treated Mosquito Nets in the Malen chiefdom, Sierra Leone.

Written by Mathias Esmann '11



Distributing nets with two high school students from the chiefdom, Anthony and Christopher. Their help with education and translation was invaluable.

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I must admit my bias. I am a wholehearted fan of Sierra Leone. Life in Sierra Leone is so rich in beauty and disaster, hope and despair, struggle and friendship, that I can't but feel an enormous gratitude for the experiences I've had there. This report is therefore personal in its nature, but I hope it will also effectively present the project that I worked on with the support of the Class of 1978 foundation.

In this report I will tell the story of the 11 weeks I spent in Sierra Leone during the summer of 2009 under the guise of a mosquito net distribution, but really jumping from one novel experience to the next, constantly alternating between the roles of teacher and student. I will try to focus on my formal work in the first part of the report, but I have also included pictures with captions at the end in an attempt to describe the many daily experiences that cause moments of "I just learned something profound" but don't fit into a neat narrative.



Freetown seen from the Lungi Peninsula where the airport is

I was the first member of our team to arrive in Freetown. I spent the night in the airport town, Lungi, with Ishmael, the Sierra Leonean friend of one of my American friends. I had never met him before, but he gave up his bed for me, fed me three meals and introduced me to his best friends in Lungi. Crossing over to Freetown, I shared a taxi with Timothy, a talkative stranger I had met on the ferry. He made sure that I would reach the UNICEF office, urging the cab driver to take me straight there and not pick up any more passengers. Once at the office, Paul Sengeh, the father of my friend from high school and my main contact, said: "We thought about putting you up at a guesthouse, but why should we when there's room at my house?". I felt from the first day— as I have very

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often traveling in so-called developing countries – a hospitality unparalleled in my native Denmark.



Brookfields area, Freetown

I would spend the first two weeks alone, based at the UNICEF office. I would meet with the director of the National Malaria Control Program (NMCP) several times, and with health experts at UNICEF daily. The organization I co-founded with my Sierra Leonean and Danish friends, Global Minimum, had raised enough funds to bring 4,000 mosquito nets to Sierra Leone (double the target we had when I wrote the application for this award). Our team would meet up in Freetown coming from the US, Sierra Leone, Denmark and Pakistan and spend 6 weeks together.

The NMCP generously agreed to let us use their truck to transport the nets to the Malen chiefdom in the south of Sierra Leone, almost bordering Liberia. In addition, they said we could use 4,000 of their nets in stock and then just replenish the amount when ours arrived (they were delayed until July 5th). After three weeks in Sierra Leone, the majority of the Global Minimum team was united in Freetown, and by July 1st we were ready, 11 man strong, to travel to Malen to get the distribution under way.

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(GMin in Malen, L-R, Faez, Lauge, Jacob, David, me, Justin, Carlos, Clem, Sam, Jamie. Jake was MIA)



Loading the 4,000 nets in Freetown

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Sahn Malen is the main village of the Malen chiefdom. This is where Global Minimum carried out its first distribution in 2007. The village is the former hub for a gigantic palm oil plantation. The commercial farming is now defunct, but local farmers maintain a modest production of palm oil for cooking and sale in the rest of the country. Consequently, a magnificent, overgrown forest of palm trees dominates the chiefdom, and we had to walk on narrow paths, across streams and occasionally through swamps to reach the 35 villages we set out to cover. The chiefdom is without electricity, running water and paved roads, but we compensated by buying a generator, bringing water from outside and walking instead of driving.



Our house in Sahn Malen

We could not just show up and start distributing. Global Minimum puts emphasis on anchoring projects locally, so our natural first stop was with the town speaker, who is the uncle of GMin co-founder and president, David Sengeh. He welcomed us, installed us in the chief's guesthouse in Sahn and sent messengers in advance to the chief of all villages that would receive nets. That way the local chief could ask the villagers to stay home from their rice and cassava farms on a given day to receive mosquito nets. He would walk with us to all the villages and introduce us at the formal town meetings. We also met with the District Health Management Team of the Pujehun district, and they loaned us their vehicle to drop off the bales of nets at strategic points throughout the chiefdom. After a proper introduction and with the nets in place, we were ready to do the distribution.

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The Town Speaker Introducing Us

Each day we would wake up at 6:00 AM so we could be in the next village by 8:00. We would use a couple of cups of water to wash our faces, eat a few loaves of bread with laughing cow cheese or canned meat, and then pack stationery and rain coats. At 6:45 AM we would hit the road, often walking up to 5 miles to reach the first village of the day. In the course of the 14-day distribution each member walked 110+ miles.



On the road to Nyanyahun

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Upon arrival in each village, we would meet the chief and he would call a town meeting to order. After proper introductions of our team by the speaker of the chiefdom, a GMin member would introduce our team, in Mende. We would perform a skit that demonstrates how the nets work and how they protect against malaria. One member of our team would fall asleep and other members would then act as mosquitoes and bite him. When the person woke up, he would exhibit all the symptoms of malaria, and eventually pass out. Then we would suspend a mosquito net over his bed, and now all the mosquitoes would attack the net, wriggle and die. The skit was narrated by a Mende speaker, and it got the message across to all groups of society, especially the kids, and everyone laughed both because the actors exaggerated their movements but also because the experience of mosquito bite induced fever was a very familiar one.



The Skit: Getting sick from Malaria



Safe under the mosquito net

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After the town meeting, we would split into teams. Each team would have a Global Minimum member, a high school student fluent in both Mende and English identified by David Sengeh, a Red Cross volunteer, and a guide from the local village to show us around. We would then visit each house in the village and distribute nets. Once the Mende speakers had gotten all the questions down, the GMin members would stay in the background during house visits and record data for our statistics. In each house we would reinforce the lessons from the town meetings: signs and symptoms of malaria, where to go when infected, how to put up the nets, and how to tuck them in under the mattress. This last point was a great crowd pleaser (everyone in the family, plus neighbors followed the instructions) because the Mende phrase for tucking in the net all along the edge of the bed is: “Soko soko panda”, which we quickly picked up. Even the smallest kids got this explanation. It was a small gesture, no more than learning an easily pronounced phrase, but it showed an interest in the culture of the place we worked. When we went around to other houses kids would wave and yell: “Soko soko panda”.



Education on the doorstep

We would remove the plastic casing of all the nets so that they couldn't as easily be sold on. In every village there were people who exaggerated the number of people in their household, or put out extra mats to increase the number of 'sleeping spaces' in their house, the measure we used to allocate nets. Our local team members did a great job of questioning dubious claims and of reminding people that any nets they hoarded would be taken away from other members of the chiefdom. This helped a lot, but some people were still eager to get extra nets so they could send them to relatives or maybe sell them for a couple of dollars, in which case the net would still be used by someone. The situation was

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made trickier by the fact that children mainly slept on the ground, and the nets were always hung over beds first. So in order to cover the children – who are the most susceptible to a fatal malaria infection – we had to cover every bed and sleeping space on the ground. All told, we might have given a net too many to some households, but at least we covered all the children in the villages. We trusted people to make the best use possible of the nets and we hope all the education we did will make more children sleep under nets.



GMin team unpacking the nets and hanging them in the shade for one day for excess insecticide to wear off



Soko Soko Panda

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In order to measure net usage over time, we made an agreement with the medical officer at the local clinic and a leading Red Cross volunteer to visit all the villages that received nets. Together we created 4 teams with 4 members each, who will each go and visit a set of villages on a regular basis (every month for the first 3 months and then every other month). The coordinator at the DHMT will then enter the data into a spreadsheet and send it to us.



Training the volunteers who are in charge of the follow up

After the distribution, I spent a week and a half traveling in Sierra Leone. I went swimming on the vast beaches, climbed up to a mountainous chimpanzee sanctuary and stuffed myself with incredibly delicious and delightfully inexpensive lobster at the Freetown expat restaurants. During the same period, I hung out with my many new friends whom I had lived with at David Sengeh's houses in Freetown and Bo Town. Particularly, I enjoyed walking down the Siaka Stevens street part of downtown Freetown. Here I could breathe the intensity of a bustling city on the coast of the Atlantic Ocean while pondering how radically different it was from the world I grew up in. Here I reaffirmed my belief that any discourse on development, international relations or plainly just other countries must be informed by extensive traveling. Learning is so much more profound when a person simultaneously has to learn a new language, a new geography, and new social mores. I will forever be grateful for the support I have received for traveling to Sierra Leone this summer and for engaging in the kind of learning I love the most. I would like to extend a big THANK YOU to the Class of 1978 Foundation.

Mathias Esmann

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Here are the results of the distribution by village:

| Town | Date | Households | Pop. | Nets Given | Sleeping Spaces | Under-fives | Pregnant Women |
|----------------|---------|------------|------|------------|-----------------|-------------|----------------|
| Nyanyahun | 7/6/09 | 73 | 800 | 417 | 403 | 243 | 20 |
| Basseleh | 7/7/09 | 79 | 850 | 390 | 401 | 221 | 29 |
| Banneleh | 7/8/09 | 46 | 356 | 164 | 164 | 96 | 10 |
| Kanga | 7/8/09 | 5 | 59 | 27 | 27 | 21 | 1 |
| Jomborhun | 7/8/09 | 16 | 134 | 54 | 54 | 33 | 6 |
| Monogoh | 7/9/09 | 6 | 52 | 20 | 20 | 17 | 0 |
| Juhun | 7/9/09 | 6 | 46 | 21 | 20 | 10 | 0 |
| Macca Old Town | 7/9/09 | 17 | 83 | 38 | 38 | 23 | 3 |
| Macca Junction | 7/9/09 | 10 | 111 | 48 | 48 | 19 | 3 |
| Borbu | 7/9/09 | 4 | 54 | 25 | 23 | 19 | 1 |
| Kpombu | 7/10/09 | 52 | 465 | 179 | 176 | 111 | 6 |
| Kassay | 7/10/09 | 39 | 412 | 162 | 162 | 97 | 7 |
| Taninihun | 7/10/09 | 14 | 0 | 45 | 43 | 26 | 2 |
| Bamba | 7/11/09 | 55 | 524 | 217 | 213 | 139 | 26 |
| Gambia | 7/11/09 | 10 | 130 | 44 | 44 | 22 | 0 |
| Gangama | 7/11/09 | 8 | 56 | 31 | 30 | 27 | 4 |
| Hongai | 7/11/09 | 69 | 593 | 245 | 244 | 141 | 18 |
| Henai | 7/11/09 | 61 | 473 | 205 | 201 | 70 | 18 |
| Sembehun | 7/13/09 | 10 | 89 | 37 | 36 | 16 | 2 |
| Sinjo | 7/13/09 | 39 | 364 | 153 | 152 | 82 | 10 |
| Semabu | 7/13/09 | 63 | 511 | 218 | 219 | 107 | 35 |
| Gehun | 7/13/09 | 3 | 25 | 9 | 9 | 6 | 1 |
| Jumbu | 7/14/09 | 55 | 481 | 180 | 180 | 138 | 15 |
| Kpetewoma | 7/14/09 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Sahuun | 7/14/09 | 20 | 141 | 63 | 62 | 30 | 1 |
| Demawu | 7/15/09 | 30 | 186 | 79 | 79 | 66 | 11 |
| Semabu 2 | 7/15/09 | 12 | 90 | 39 | 38 | 23 | 7 |
| Kpangama | 7/15/09 | 7 | 61 | 26 | 26 | 22 | 9 |
| Kortumahun | 7/16/09 | 41 | 332 | 151 | 150 | 72 | 9 |
| Massao | 7/16/09 | 18 | 148 | 71 | 69 | 43 | 9 |
| Walleh | 7/16/09 | 3 | 36 | 17 | 17 | 4 | 0 |
| Fakaba | 7/17/09 | 24 | 222 | 89 | 89 | 74 | 12 |
| Potain | 7/17/09 | 17 | 126 | 65 | 65 | 25 | 1 |
| Gbongboma | 7/17/09 | 24 | 133 | 77 | 77 | 45 | 3 |
| Gondorhun | 7/18/09 | 61 | 484 | 212 | 214 | 107 | 13 |
| Kpangba | 7/18/09 | 33 | 264 | 99 | 106 | 62 | 12 |
| | | 1030 | 8891 | 3917 | 3899 | 2257 | 304 |



We were walking on the beach outside Freetown, when we tried to help some fishermen pull a net in. The process takes several hours.



Ishmael in his recording studio

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Freetown seen from the Ministry of Health. The national stadium is on the left, St. Anthony's parish to the right. This new church was funded exclusively by passing the hat on Sundays.



The Bomeh Area in Freetown. It's a huge garbage dump in the middle of the city, and about 2,000 people live on it.



Kroo Bay. A nearby slum, the worst in Sierra Leone.

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Next to our house in Sahn



In front of our house in Sahn where we, just like this girl, would fetch water for cooking and cleaning

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The former Town Hall of Sahn. It was burnt down during the country's ten-year civil war



We worked during the rainy season in Sierra Leone. Every other day it would rain like this, even if only for a short while.

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Our team with a big bunch of the wonderful children and young people from Sahn. This picture is taken during half-time of the week long soccer tournament we organized for the 10 biggest villages in the chiefdom.