

# Stop risky GM mosquito releases – we have the right to say no

2 May 2019



We, the undersigned civil society organisations in Africa, hereby call upon the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the Target Malaria project to stop the intended release of 10 000 genetically modified (GM) “male sterile” mosquitoes in Burkina Faso, as the release poses unacceptable risks to human beings and the environment.

We note with grave concern that African citizens are being exposed to life threatening health risks, through questionable technology involving the release of GM mosquitoes. We are even more alarmed to learn that, by Target Malaria’s own admission, there are no advantages expected from the initial proposed GM mosquito release, as it is intended only for training purposes and not expected to deliver any benefits for malaria control in Burkina Faso.

We are aware that this open release is intended to test the infrastructure and biosafety systems in Burkina Faso, in preparation for future releases of experimental ‘extinction’ technologies, in the form of “gene drive” mosquitoes.

There is absolutely no justification for releasing these GM mosquitoes in Burkina Faso or elsewhere on the continent. It is highly unethical and totally unacceptable to conduct experiments that carry risks yet will not bring any result for malaria control. In fact, the intended release of the first-ever GM animal on the continent shows a callous disregard for African people and the environment and has caused many scientists to speak out about potentially harmful impacts. Indeed, it smacks of colonial medicine.

Furthermore, there is evidence that Target Malaria is paying local villagers 400 CFA francs (approximately 70 US cents) per hour to collect biting female mosquitoes from their own bodies. This pitifully small financial incentive for individuals to expose themselves to the possibility of contracting malaria is an outrage and extremely questionable from an ethical standpoint. Africa is once again being used as a cheap test laboratory with African citizens as the lab rats.

We note with concern that the Target Malaria project is shrouded in secrecy. There is no published independent environmental risk assessment (ERA) for the proposed release, other than that commissioned by Target Malaria’s funders. There has also been no public consultation, apart from “public engagement” activities conducted by Target Malaria, without any independent mechanism to ensure “free, prior informed consent”, which has resulted in social strife in the communities concerned. Any decision on open releases of GM mosquitoes requires meaningful public consultation fostered by the government of Burkina Faso, as mandated by the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety to the Convention on Biological Diversity, to which Burkina Faso is a Party.

The lack of full public consultation on the ERA and the project’s activities undermines the legitimacy and credibility of the reported approval of these experiments by the Institut de Recherche en Sciences de la Santé (IRSS), a Target Malaria consortium partner. Without this, local villagers, and the people of Burkina Faso and Africa, will not be able to make decisions regarding



consent that are based on being fully informed about the risks. It is not the first time that the Gates Foundation has been implicated in carrying out clinical trials in developing countries without the adequate informed consent of those being tested.<sup>1</sup>

In addition, the planned release will not be contained but likely to cause unintended transboundary spreading into the territories of several African countries, where the GM mosquitoes will present risks to biodiversity and human health, notwithstanding the fact that these countries will not be prepared to face these risks. We expressly say NO to these GM mosquitoes entering our lives on the continent.

Rather than depending on top-down external techno-fixes, which have resulted in failed malaria interventions in the past, we call instead for a redoubling of efforts to address malaria based on existing African pharmacological solutions and knowledge. At the same time, a more holistic approach in tackling the main factors contributing to the disease and its transmission is needed, including increased investment in public health services.

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1. <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/without-consent-how-drugs-companies-exploit-indian-guinea-pigs-6261919.html>

