DIGITAL HEALTH INFRASTRUCTURE: THE BACKBONE OF SURVEILLANCE FOR MALARIA ELIMINATION

Strong health information systems hold the key to ending malaria in the Greater Mekong Subregion

Steven Mellor
ICT Knowledge Management Consultant

Jonathan Cox
Senior Lecturer
Faculty of Infectious and Tropical Diseases
London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine

Susann Roth
Senior Social Development Specialist
Sustainable Development and Climate Change Department
Asian Development Bank

Jane Parry
Senior Public Health and Development Writer

THE IMPERATIVE TO ELIMINATE MALARIA

Elimination of malaria is not only technically feasible but also a public health imperative. With millions of people at risk from the disease across Asia and the Pacific, and malaria imposing an even bigger burden in Africa, the race is on to eliminate the disease in the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS). The area is of particular concern because of growing resistance to artemisinin-based combination therapies. Resistance to this last line of simple-to-use and effective malaria drugs has been detected in Cambodia, the Lao People’s Democratic Republic (Lao PDR), Myanmar, Thailand, and Viet Nam.

Elimination of malaria is not only technically feasible but also a public health imperative.
What is malaria elimination?
Malaria elimination is “the interruption of local transmission (reduction to zero incidence) of a specified malaria parasite in a defined geographical area as a result of deliberate activities. Continued measures to prevent re-establishment of transmission are required.”

What is malaria eradication?
Malaria eradication is defined as “permanent reduction to zero of the worldwide incidence of infection caused by human malaria parasites as a result of deliberate activities. Interventions are no longer required once eradication has been achieved.”


Government policy in these five affected countries is moving from containment to elimination. All five have elimination plans in place, and their heads of government were among the signatories to the 2015 Asia Pacific Leaders Malaria Alliance (APLMA) commitment to rid the region of malaria by 2030.

In the past 15 years, GMS countries have been successful in reducing malaria, largely attributable to scaling up of artemisinin combination therapies, rapid diagnostic tests, and vector control strategies, made possible with support from the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria from the early 2000s onward.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), Cambodia, the Lao PDR, and Viet Nam have achieved a decrease in cases of more than 75% from 2000 to 2015 and Thailand a 50%–75% decrease. Because of changes in diagnostic testing over time, the direction of trends in Myanmar before 2008 cannot be discerned, but the incidence of confirmed cases decreased by 68% between 2008 and 2014.

While cases and deaths in Myanmar have fallen dramatically over the past 5 years, case numbers have largely flattened in Viet Nam. Moreover, Cambodia, the Lao PDR, and Thailand have all experienced setbacks. For example, reported case numbers in Thailand rose from 32,569 in 2012 to 37,921 in 2014. Certain population groups are at especially high risk for malaria (Figure 1). Similarly, in the Lao PDR the number of reported cases fell from 46,202 in 2012 to 38,131 in 2013, but rebounded to 48,071 a year later (Table 1). Available data also demonstrate the potentially epidemic nature of malaria transmission in the GMS—for example, in the Lao PDR case numbers in 2012 were more than 2.5 times higher than in 2011 following major malaria outbreaks in six southern provinces.

**SUPPORT FOR MALARIA ELIMINATION IN THE GREATER MEKONG SUBREGION**

Extra resources for targeted elimination along key sections of the Thailand–Cambodia border were mobilized through the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, which supported a containment project from 2009 following the emergence of artemisinin-tolerant *Plasmodium falciparum* parasites in this area. As potential resistance was detected elsewhere in the GMS,

### Table 1: Confirmed Malaria Cases and Malaria Deaths in the Greater Mekong Subregion by Year

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cambodia</td>
<td>49,356</td>
<td>151</td>
<td>57,423</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>40,476</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>21,309</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>25,152</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>(49.04)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lao PDR</td>
<td>20,800</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>17,835</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>46,202</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>38,131</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>48,071</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>131.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Myanmar</td>
<td>420,808</td>
<td>788</td>
<td>465,294</td>
<td>581</td>
<td>480,586</td>
<td>403</td>
<td>251,273</td>
<td>236</td>
<td>152,195</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>(63.83)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thailand</td>
<td>32,480</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>24,897</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>32,569</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>33,302</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>37,921</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>16.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Viet Nam</td>
<td>17,515</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>16,612</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>19,638</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>17,128</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>15,752</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>(10.07)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

() = negative, Lao PDR = Lao People’s Democratic Republic.

Note: These figures represent confirmed malaria cases from health facilities and may not include cases reported by community health workers and the private sector.


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the geographical scope of containment widened. A subregional action framework—the Emergency Response to Artemisinin Resistance—was initiated in 2013, and following a WHO review in late 2015 the strategic focus was realigned to support malaria elimination rather than containment of artemisinin resistance. Ambitious national elimination targets within the GMS reflect the seriousness of the current drug resistance problem, but also the fact that rates of malaria incidence in many parts of the subregion are now sufficiently low to make interruption of transmission a realistic objective. This switch in emphasis has been endorsed by ADB as a public health “best buy” and supported under ADB’s Regional Malaria and Other Communicable Disease Threats Trust Fund.

WHO has a regional technical strategy for malaria elimination in the GMS which is already being incorporated into country plans. This calls for case-based malaria surveillance across all GMS countries and specifies the essential components of robust malaria surveillance systems (Figure 2). In addition, it recommends mandatory case notification and operational systems for epidemiological investigation and classification of cases, and foci in areas targeted for elimination.

Malaria elimination in the GMS presents unique challenges that countries must address, including the role of the private sector in health care; lack of access to high-risk groups, especially migrant and mobile populations; the importance of asymptomatic and/or low-density infections; and the increasing relative importance of *Plasmodium vivax*.

There are three principal approaches to malaria surveillance (Table 2). Typically countries use one or more of these systems to collect malaria data. To eliminate malaria, it is not enough just to know the total number of cases—information typically collected at the facility level and aggregated nationally on a monthly basis through a health management information system (HMIS).

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http://iris.wpro.who.int/bitstream/handle/10665.1/10945/9789290617181_eng.pdf?sequence=1
Methodology: (1) Electronic literature searches to identify (a) malaria-specific mHealth projects outside the GMS and (b) any mHealth activities, regardless of health focus, within the GMS. Initial searches were carried out in PubMed and subsequently extended to include gray literature and web materials identified through Google Scholar and online directories and repositories [1-7]. (2) Country visits to Cambodia, the Lao PDR, Myanmar, Thailand, and Viet Nam. Interviews were conducted with a range of partners (local and international nongovernment organizations, international agencies, and donors) to obtain key data for the mHealth system directory and solicit views on the potential role of mHealth within national malaria elimination strategies. Partners were identified in advance through web and literature searches and existing networks of contacts. (3) Review of available strategy documents relating to malaria elimination, surveillance, and monitoring and evaluation at national and subregional levels. It is important to recognize that this constitutes a rapid landscaping exercise and as such the outputs should not be considered as an exhaustive mapping of all activities across the subregion, although it is unlikely that any malaria-specific activities were overlooked.

It is also essential to identify, treat, and track individual cases. Disease-specific programs, including those tackling malaria, collect this information and can gather individual case and foci investigation and response data. However, this type of surveillance is often donor supported rather than government funded, and has limited scope for collaboration on data gathering with the private sector, where many patients are treated. When an alert system is in place and malaria becomes notifiable, making it a legal requirement for all health-care workers to report confirmed cases, it becomes easier to ensure that all cases are captured, and to conduct the necessary case and outbreak investigation and response to eliminate malaria.

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Digital health technology and malaria elimination

An inventory of current information and communication technology (ICT) applications in Cambodia, the Lao PDR, Myanmar, Thailand, and Viet Nam found there has been a plethora of digital health projects initiated across the GMS geared to surveillance of malaria and other communicable diseases (see Box, p. 6). However, of the 75 activities captured by this exercise, only 19 were directly applicable to surveillance strengthening for malaria elimination. Approximately half of the activities focused on data collection and reporting, including...
applications for national or subnational data reporting or data collection and reporting tools for frontline workers. Some focused on client education and behavior change communication, diagnostic and treatment support, decision support, and work planning and supply chain management. A number of activities also included an operational research element.

More than a third of activities identified in the landscaping exercise represent routine systems, but only three of the 35 mHealth activities (i.e., those that make use of cellphone technology) can be considered to be routine; moreover, the large majority of these are either pilot projects or projects currently in their development phase. There are currently no examples of large-scale/programmatic mHealth tools being used to support malaria surveillance in the subregion, although some relatively ambitious projects are being planned.

Notably, a number of mHealth application areas (e.g., tools to strengthen diagnostic services and support quality assurance systems, to provide training and education to frontline health-care workers in planning and scheduling, and to manage financial transactions and incentives) have been largely unexplored in the GMS context and there is scope to learn from non-GMS experience in these areas. The current landscape points to a variety of ways in which ICT could be better deployed in the GMS to support malaria elimination (Figure 3).

The need to go upstream

While digital health solutions have a key role to play throughout the health systems of all five GMS countries, malaria elimination cannot be successfully supported by piecemeal measures. Moreover, none of the existing information systems for vertical, disease-specific programs provides spatially and temporally specific data with sufficiently detailed case information to enable disaggregation by population group or classification by origin of infection—both essential elements for case investigation for malaria elimination.6

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>National</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Typical Primary User</th>
<th>Typical Characteristics</th>
<th>Uses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Health management information system</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>Monthly</td>
<td>Ministry of Health Planning Department</td>
<td>Facility-level aggregate data for all diseases</td>
<td>National level planning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Limited malaria data (number of cases)</td>
<td>National statistics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>No or very limited private sector</td>
<td>Monitor system performance (limited)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disease specific</td>
<td>Not always</td>
<td>Usually monthly but can be more frequent</td>
<td>Vertical programs such as malaria, tuberculosis, and HIV</td>
<td>Vertical programs</td>
<td>Support program management and performance monitoring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Can be limited to specific geographical areas</td>
<td>Stratification</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Basic case-level data (line listing)</td>
<td>Targeted intervention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Data on interventions (bed nets, indoor residual spraying, behavior change communication, etc.)</td>
<td>Case investigation and response</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Can include case and foci investigation and response data</td>
<td>Donor reporting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Includes community health workers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Limited private sector</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alert system</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>Real time, 24/48 hrs, and weekly depending on disease</td>
<td>Country Centers for Disease Control and Prevention</td>
<td>Notifiable diseases (by law)</td>
<td>Case investigation and response</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Case-level data</td>
<td>Outbreak investigation and response</td>
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<td>Outbreak data</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Case and foci investigation data</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Includes private sector (for notifiable diseases)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Government funded</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Authors.
Box: Digital Health Solutions in Cambodia’s Drive to Eliminate Malaria

Cambodia’s routine systems use simple and sustainable technology. Its malaria information system database processes malaria data from village malaria workers, health facilities, and the private sector, and data relating to bed-net distribution and management. It collects individual case data for all patients seen by village malaria workers at public facilities and by selected private providers. The system enables village-level stratification based on incidence data and is linked to the country’s HMIS data for 100% coverage and data cross-checking. These data are synchronized monthly by e-mail.

The system has been a standalone database since 2010, but now needs to be updated to a web-based system as Cambodia’s internet connectivity has improved and as the country transitions from control to pre-elimination and elimination. Core registries allowing mapping of cases (for administrative divisions, villages, and health facilities) also need to be updated and maintained. This is essential for timely case investigation and response and easier linkage with other systems, such as the HMIS and a private sector database managed by the international nongovernment organization Population Services International. Cambodia is also working on improving its capacity to geo-enable its information to allow targeted case investigation.

Cambodia uses mHealth solutions only for gaps in routine system and special situations.

- Day 0: SMS and web-based technologies for real-time alerts from community health workers to enable rapid response (Box figure).
- Stock-out system: monitoring of malaria drugs at health facilities using simple SMS- and web-based technologies to minimize incidence of medicines being out of stock.
- SMS referral system to monitor private sector referrals to the public facilities in a containment zone.

All systems are free to users through an agreement with the telecommunications companies.

The development of mHealth solutions in Cambodia holds several important lessons for other countries looking to do the same.

- Consider mHealth solutions that address gaps in the routine surveillance system or where real-time data and/or immediate action are required.
- Keep it simple and use appropriate technology: using SMS on a cheap phone can be as effective in some situations as an app on a smartphone, but may cost less and be more sustainable.
- Try to make the system free to users by collaborating with telecommunications companies and other private sector providers not only to reduce the cost but also to make the system easier to maintain.
- Regular monitoring and evaluation and refresher training are required to ensure the completeness and accuracy of the data and to address any challenges encountered quickly.
- Use a standardized approach across vertical diseases programs and the entire HMIS to geo-enable the health information.

Day 0 reporting data flow

1. Community health workers: preregister phone number to system using free SMS
2. Community health workers: report malaria case using free SMS, including malaria type, age, sex
3. District staff: receive patient data via SMS for prompt response
4. National malaria database: patient information is visible on Google Maps

HMIS = Health management information system, SMS = short messaging service.
A strong digital health backbone connecting different levels of the health system is a sound long-term aim, while in the short to medium terms improving vertical systems targeting malaria is also helpful. However, rather than continuing to focus exclusively on investment in vertical programs such as those targeting malaria, GMS countries would be well served to broaden their investments and deploy them further upstream. A key part of this process is to examine and address the degree of information system interoperability and data compatibility between vertical components and other parts of the health system. At present vertical programs exist in isolation from the wider health system, and even within a program there is limited linking of patient data from one facility to another. A range of broader digital health solutions can benefit all diseases, including malaria, besides ensuring reliable access to internet and cellphone coverage.


Rather than continuing to focus exclusively on investment in vertical programs such as those targeting malaria, GMS countries would be well served to broaden their investments and deploy them further upstream.

These include unique patient identifiers, master patient registries, and electronic medical records* that are all connected to the other registries (administrative divisions, villages, health facilities) core to the HMIS. Moreover, investments in the eHealth backbone
ADB supports the improvement of malaria information systems as a high-priority action for malaria elimination in the GMS. Some countries are currently struggling to manage large amounts of case-level data using outdated paper or Excel-based legacy systems involving aggregation of data at lower levels. This results in data errors and a lack of detailed case data required for elimination. An opportunity exists to move to case-based online systems by upgrading existing country-specific systems or using platforms such as DHIS2 and OpenMRS, and ensuring that these...

infrastructure, such as a client registry, shared health records, and an interoperability layer that can facilitate the integration of malaria elimination and other vertical disease programs into wider national and regional health security mechanisms. They can play a significant role in overall strengthening of health systems, which has population health benefits beyond malaria elimination and contributes to universal health coverage (Figure 4). From this framework, malaria information systems can then be effectively implemented.

**Figure 4:** Health Management Information System Backbone and Interoperability Layer

HIV = human immunodeficiency virus, TB = tuberculosis.
Source: Open HIE. https://ohie.org
ADB supports the improvement of malaria information systems as a high-priority action for malaria elimination in the GMS.

Case investigation is completed within 3 days, with verification of slide results (and, where possible, molecular confirmation) carried out at a provincial laboratory. In the same time frame, epidemiological investigation classifies the case as either locally acquired or imported (i.e., individuals who have traveled to a malaria-endemic country or an endemic part of the PRC within the previous month). Where cases are considered to be locally acquired, measures to prevent onward transmission, including screening of neighbors and vector control, are implemented within 7 days.

The 1–3–7 approach took time to implement. During early phases of implementation, targets for timeliness of case notification, investigation, and response were often missed. Even today some challenges remain, particularly in terms of community acceptance of malaria screening and maintaining awareness and diagnostic skill among health staff where case numbers are extremely low.

A recent study of the 1–3–7 approach concluded that ambitious time-bound targets for reporting, case investigation, and foci response can be achieved even in a large and diverse country like the PRC. Strengths of the approach include a well-functioning reporting system, targets for timeliness of case notification, investigation, and response were often missed. Even today some challenges remain, particularly in terms of community acceptance of malaria screening and maintaining awareness and diagnostic skill among health staff where case numbers are extremely low.

*An existing model to adopt and adapt*

The GMS countries are currently at the pre-elimination stage in terms of their disease surveillance systems, with standalone malaria-specific surveillance systems in place to manage their malaria programs and gather village-level data. However, as countries move toward elimination (and subsequently prevention of reintroduction) it becomes more difficult to sustain vertical systems with low case numbers, and integration of malaria surveillance into the country’s existing notifiable disease system should be considered. This approach has already been taken by the People’s Republic of China (PRC). Its “1–3–7” reporting system applies to all public and private health-care facilities and integrates malaria into the system. It is also developing specific protocols and tools for following up malaria cases.

*Under the 1–3–7 system all patients presenting with fever are tested for malaria using microscopy or a rapid diagnostic test, and those with the disease receive immediate treatment. Confirmed and suspected cases are reported within 24 hours using the web-based China Information System for Disease Control and Prevention. A cellphone-based short messaging service (SMS) alert system notifies staff at the local Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention.

**Tracking progress in surveillance systems for malaria elimination**

The GMS countries can also look to the APLMA as they embark on the road to malaria elimination. The APLMA Leaders’ Malaria Elimination Roadmap is based on six priorities to accelerate progress: three to establish a robust and coherent approach to malaria elimination, and three to build sustained and effective financing.

1. Unite national efforts and regional action.
2. Map, prevent, test, and treat the disease everywhere.
3. Ensure high-quality malaria services, tests, medicines, nets, and insecticides.
4. Improve targeting and efficiency to maximize impact.
5. Mobilize domestic financing and leverage external support.
6. Innovate for elimination.
APLMA will produce the APLMA Leaders Dashboard to highlight progress toward its priorities. The dashboard will enable the five GMS countries to benchmark themselves against their regional peers, and show where they must increase their efforts so as to reach their targets in the coming years.

The Asia eHealth Information Network (AeHIN) is also a valuable resource for countries. This peer network promotes better use of ICT to achieve better health outcomes through peer-to-peer assistance and knowledge sharing and learning throughout the region. AeHIN coordinates country-level HMIS convergence workshops to develop road maps for HMIS strengthening and integration of vertical diseases program surveillance systems based on the ICTEN principles. The recently established AeHIN Geographic Information Systems Laboratory does itself provide support for countries to geo-enable their HMIS and therefore be positioned to map cases precisely based on established and maintained core registries (i.e., for administrative divisions, villages, and health facilities).

![Figure 5: Schematic of the Chain of Events Conducted Within the 1–3–7 Time Windows](image)

**Figure 5:** Schematic of the Chain of Events Conducted Within the 1–3–7 Time Windows

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WITHIN</th>
<th>WITHIN</th>
<th>WITHIN</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>1 DAY</strong></td>
<td><strong>3 DAYS</strong></td>
<td><strong>7 DAYS</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(local health-care facility)</td>
<td>(county CDC where the case is reported)</td>
<td>(county CDC where the patient resides and/or works)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All suspected fever cases</td>
<td>Laboratory/clinically diagnosed case</td>
<td>Focus investigation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Report by hospital within 1 day to web-based national case report system</td>
<td>Case confirmation by double microscopy and polymerase chain reaction at central lab</td>
<td>Case classification</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Active foci</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Inactive foci</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Pseudo foci</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Geographic reactive case detection and indoor residual spraying</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Demographic reactive case detection and health education</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

CDC = Center for Disease Control and Prevention.
Future investments in digital health infrastructure to support the strengthening of health systems and malaria elimination efforts have the power to be transformational. However, it must be remembered that digital health solutions are tools, not health interventions in their own right, and must be guided by certain principles.

- Have a digital health strategy as part of the health information system strategy to ensure future digital health investments are better planned and coordinated across the health system. This is key to ensuring sustainability, information system interoperability, and data compatibility between disparate parts of the health sector.
- Vertical disease programs will always have their place, but building the data infrastructure backbone yields greater gains, especially in terms of strengthening health systems.
- mHealth has the potential to improve the quality of malaria surveillance and bring surveillance closer to the patient, but applications need to be well designed to take into account contextual factors (e.g., existing workflows), anchored in national eHealth strategies, scalable, sustainable, and allow for formal monitoring and evaluation.
- Do not reinvent the wheel: look to working examples from other countries in Asia and the Pacific and beyond.
- Team up with regional peers wherever possible, e.g., through APLMA to maintain momentum for political commitment, and through peer networks such as AeHIN for practical and technical support.
- Use the business case for digital health investments to lobby for government-supported expansion of cellphone and internet coverage.
Steven Mellor is based in Cambodia and has more than 20 years’ practical experience in developing countries assessing, designing, developing, and implementing information management solutions for a wide variety of clients across a number of sectors, including health, agriculture, education, and finance. In recent years he has specialized in developing systems for disease surveillance, with an emphasis on malaria.

Jonathan Cox is a senior lecturer at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, UK. His background is in medical geography, with specific research interests in spatial epidemiology and disease surveillance in epidemic and low-endemic settings. Jon has led a number of projects to support strengthening malaria surveillance systems in Southeast Asia, particularly in the Greater Mekong Subregion. At a global level, he has contributed to surveillance policy and strategy development through his work with the World Health Organization and other agencies.

Susann Roth supports the health sector development work of the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and co-led the preparation of ADB’s revised operational plan for health, which supports developing member countries in achieving universal health coverage. Susann is particularly interested in the public–private dialogue to provide quality health services for the poor, and in information and communication technology solutions for universal health coverage and strengthening health systems.

Jane Parry is a senior public health and development writer. Based in Hong Kong, China, for more than 2 decades, she is a consultant to ADB’s health team supporting strategic communications, generation of policy materials, and advocacy. She has a particular interest in health systems and policy, health equity, urban health, and the health of marginalized populations.

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Asian Development Bank
6 ADB Avenue, Mandaluyong City
1550 Metro Manila, Philippines
Tel +63 2 632 4444
Fax +63 2 636 2444

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