

Ibrahim Kargbo Labour<sup>1</sup>, Habib I. Kamara<sup>2</sup>, Abdul Conteh<sup>1</sup>, Victoria Redwood-Sawyer<sup>2</sup>, Mohamed S. Bah<sup>2</sup>, Gandi Kallon<sup>2</sup>, Mustapha Sonnie<sup>2</sup>, Mary H. Hodges<sup>2</sup>, Patricia Houk<sup>4</sup>, Benoit Dembele<sup>3</sup>, Sarah Craciunoiu<sup>5</sup>, Achille Kabore<sup>5</sup>, Yaobi Zhang<sup>4</sup>, Steven D. Reid<sup>4</sup>, Angela Weaver<sup>4</sup>

1. Neglected Tropical Diseases Program, Ministry of Health and Sanitation, Sierra Leone
2. Helen Keller International, 22 Signal Hill Rd., PO Box 352, Freetown, Sierra Leone
3. Helen Keller International, Regional Office for Africa, Dakar, Senegal
4. Helen Keller International, New York, USA
5. FHI 360, Washington DC, USA

## BACKGROUND

In 2008, baseline mapping for schistosomiasis (SCH) amongst school aged children (SAC) was conducted in 16 districts of Sierra Leone, where prevalence was found to be high (>50%) in five and moderate (between 10% and 50%) in four districts. Mass drug administration (MDA) with praziquantel (PZQ) started in 2009 among the nine endemic districts. After five rounds of treatment, impact assessments were conducted in 2016 that showed a reduction in overall prevalence from 42.2% to 20.4%, no district had high prevalence, with only 2.0% moderate or high intensity infections. MDA schedule was adjusted accordingly.

In March 2020, WHO declared the COVID-19 pandemic and recommended postponing field-based NTD activities, such as MDAs. Preparations were already complete for the SCH MDA in nine districts, but the Ministry of Health postponed it following the WHO announcement as public gatherings were limited and schools closed. The SCH MDA was then deferred to October 2020 when schools had re-opened.

## METHODS

The SCH MDA was modified to include a risk assessment, contingency plans, and standard operational procedures. Trainings were held in smaller, socially distanced sessions, and included handwashing and mask wearing. Enhanced community engagement included the identification of negative influencers to MDA Compliance on social media, designed targeted 'push-backs' and dialogue to build trust in the health sector. Pico videos were translated in five local languages to increase health worker and public awareness of the SCH MDA and COVID-19 safety. A supervisory checklist was adapted to capture compliance with COVID-19 prevention measures during the preparations and MDA.

## RESULTS

Reports showed that overall 84.5% (678,929) SAC received PZQ. All districts reached effective coverage ( $\geq 75\%$ ) ranging from 76.1% in Bombali and 97.5% in Tonkolili. The impact of COVID-19 on the MDA included initial delay, misinformation through social media (mostly WhatsApp) even in remote communities and NTD staff reassignment to COVID-19 surveillance. Some parents were reluctant to send children to school or allow them to participate in the MDA, but those refusing treatment remained small following enhanced community engagement.



MDA during Covid in Karene District

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The study was made possible by the generous support of the American people through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The contents are the sole responsibility of the Act to End NTDs | West Program, led by FHI 360 in partnership with Helen Keller International, Health and Development International, Deloitte, World Vision, Amiceres, and The AIM Initiative under Cooperative Agreement No. 7200AA18CA00011 and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID or the United States Government.

Figure 1: MDA Coverage for SCH - 2020

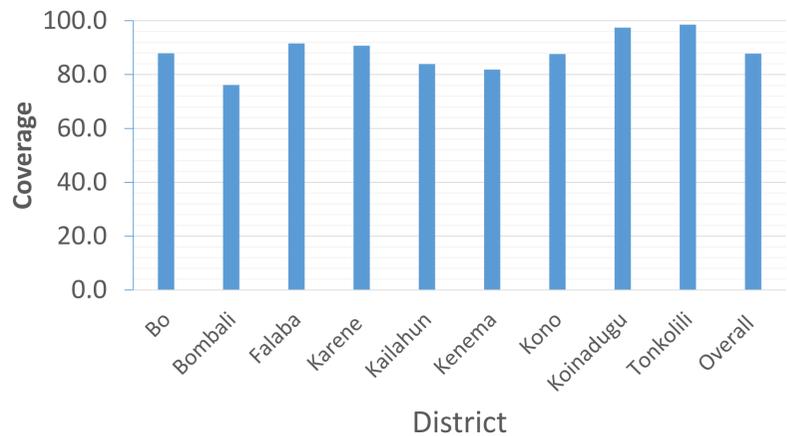


Figure 2. Map Prevalence of SCH at baseline and impact

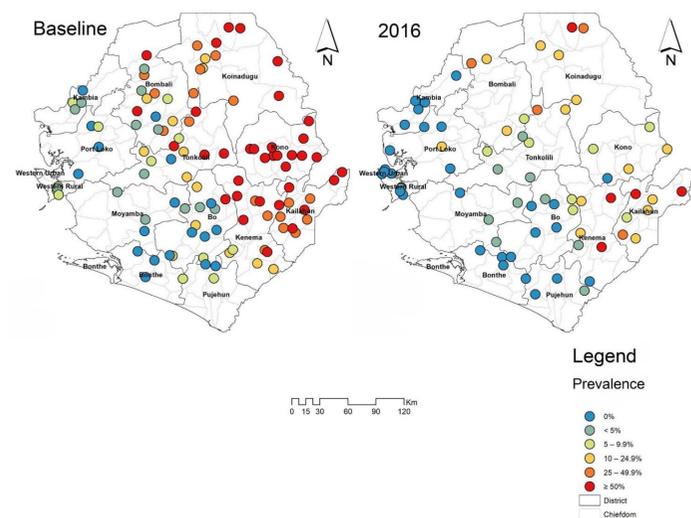
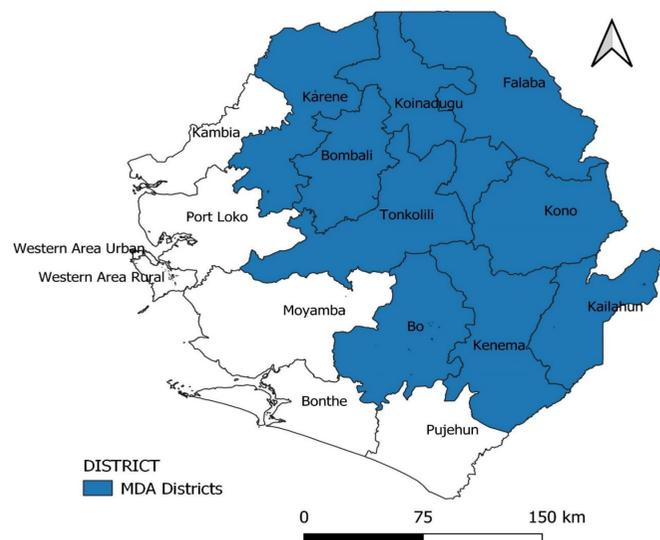


Figure 3. Map showing MDA districts



## RECOMENDATIONS

- Continue to emphasize safety measures, inform health workers and communities on adverse events so they are not mistaken for Covid-19 symptoms
- Proper use of face masks, gloves and hand hygiene should be part of the training and MDA

## CONCLUSION

Despite the pandemic, careful messaging targeting potential negative influencers and channels of communication emphasized safety measures and informed health workers and communities on beneficial as well as adverse events enabled effective coverage in all nine districts.



**USAID**  
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

Act to End  
**NTDs**  
W E S T

**fhi360**  
THE SCIENCE OF IMPROVING LIVES

**HELEN  
KELLER  
INTL**