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ExxonMobil, Equatorial Guinea, oil, and malaria – a sticky situation

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Abstract

Equatorial Guinea, the most prosperous country in Africa, still bears a high malaria burden. With massive wealth from oil reserves and nearly half its population living in island ecotypes favorable for malaria control, only poor governance can explain continued parasite burden. The oil company ExxonMobil contributed to state failure by financially backing the country's dictator and other officials through illicit payments. Now ExxonMobil, which in part perpetuated the malaria burden in Equatorial Guinea, funds non-governmental organizations, charitable foundations, and universities to advocate for and undertake malaria work. The terms under which public health can ethically engage with such an actor are unclear. We reviewed the business and foundation activities of ExxonMobil and surveyed grantee organizations about their conflict of interest policies. Reforms in ExxonMobil's business practice as well as its charitable structure, and reforms in the way public health groups screen and manage conflicts of interest are needed to ensure any relationship ultimately improves the health of citizens.

Equatorial Guinea

Equatorial Guinea is made up by the island Bioko (where the capital is located), a continental area (Río Muni), and several smaller islands. Considered by many to be the most corrupt and oppressive on the continent, the state is dominated by the associates and family of President Obiang, who installed himself in a bloody coup in 1979. Human rights reports from the United States of America (US) Department of State repeatedly document unlawful killings by security forces, government-sanctioned kidnappings, and the systematic torture of prisoners (1). The development of large oil reserves, discovered in 1995, dramatically increased government revenue. Equatorial Guinea is now the third largest exporter of oil in Sub-Saharan Africa and the 2009 per capita gross domestic product was \$37,600 (2). However, the new wealth strengthened Obiang's rule without improvements in accountability or transparency.

In fact, the people of Equatorial Guinea face a grave health and welfare situation (3). Sixty percent of the country's approximately 650,000 inhabitants still live on less than US\$1 per day (4). Malaria, with an estimated 193,000 cases in 2006, is among the key health concerns (5). Malaria control efforts in the country are supported by a large Global Fund commitment with US\$23,074,306 disbursed from 2006 to date (6). However, in contrast to the reduction of malaria incidence in some countries with high levels of external assistance, incidence did not decrease in Equatorial Guinea where, according to the 2008 World Malaria Report, the control program was implemented less than optimally (5). Providing international assistance to a state with ample resources is not understandable when other endemic countries are facing acute shortfalls. It also appears ineffective when the basic political commitment for development is missing. In the counterfactual scenario without poor governance, malaria transmission would be curtailed given the favorable ecology present in island settings and the immense wealth available in the state (7). Recent declines in malaria and all-cause burden on Bioko Island following the introduction of relatively straightforward antimalarial measures support such an assertion (8). Notably, this impact represents the efforts of a public-private partnership led by Marathon Oil (9).

The paradox of abundant natural resources but poor development outcomes in Equatorial Guinea is a prototypical example of the resource curse phenomenon (10). The rapid influx of wealth in one sector can lead to the appreciation of the real exchange rate, depression of other economic sectors, general inflation, potential for conflict, and the encouragement of weak or corrupt management. In Equatorial Guinea the transformation of the country into a petro-state strengthened the rule of the government by enabling the purchase of security

protection and provided Obiang the means to control the ruling elite through patronage (11). Successive World Bank and International Monetary Fund reports identified off-the-budget cash advances provided by oil companies against future revenues, a lack of financial controls, weak fiscal discipline, and underinvestment in public services as chief contributors to the dismal state of affairs (12,13). However, while the resource trap may be a potent force, underdevelopment is not a necessary consequence. The economic and political mismanagement of the Equatorial Guinea was not inevitable. It is foremost the result of deliberate actions by, or the collusion of, certain individuals and institutions.

Exxon in Equatorial Guinea

ExxonMobil's involvement in Equatorial Guinea began with the discovery of the Zafiro oil field in 1995 (14). The company, which is the largest player in the country's oil industry, pays the government a royalty of about 15% (typical rates in Sub-Saharan Africa are 50-70%) to operate the field (15,16). Preferential terms on rich fields such as Zafiro, which produces more than 200,000 barrels per day (17), helped Exxon become the most profitable corporation in the world with 2000-2009 profits averaging US\$27 billion per year (18). In spite of the uneven arrangement, Equatorial Guinea still earns considerable income from this partnership. Unfortunately, these national gains have eluded most of the population. For example, both the infant and child mortality rate actually increased from 103 and 170 deaths per 1000 live births in 1990 to 124 and 206 respectively in 2007 (19). Benefits from natural resources accrued solely to the country's ruling elite either through stolen public funds or directly through corrupt contracts and other payments from the oil industry (20).

In 2004, a United States Senate investigation of several accounts at Riggs Bank owned by President Obiang or his family members discovered about US\$500 million in deposits (21–23). In the course of tracing the laundered money, the Senate panel uncovered payments to the accounts by ExxonMobil, along with several other oil companies (21–23). The revelation led to further investigation by the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the Securities and Exchange Commission under the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act, which makes it unlawful for US companies to bribe government officials to obtain or retain business. The investigators documented a range of activities by ExxonMobil including the leasing of land from the president's wife, at above market rates, to participating in joint ventures with a holding company controlled by Obiang himself (21–23). At present, the ruling family is the target of several international criminal investigations in Spain and France, the latter which already seized millions

of dollars in sports cars (24). The United States only recently began similar proceedings in Los Angeles and the reluctance to investigate has been attributed to the interests of American oil companies, led by ExxonMobil (24).

In a 2008 assessment of revenue transparency in oil and gas companies, Transparency International ranked ExxonMobil's performance, on a three level scale from low to high, as middle in payments and low in operations and anti-corruption programs (25). While ExxonMobil's overall performance improved in the 2011 report, the company continues to be among the worst overall performer in country level corporate disclosure and scored only 8%, out of 100% compared to Marathon Oil's 54%, in Equatorial Guinea specifically (26). ExxonMobil's history as among the least forth-coming corporations about the fees they paid to countries led Paul Wolfowitz, former director of the World Bank, to condemn the extractive company for keeping failed states failing (27). ExxonMobil's arrangement of aiding corruption in return for profiteering enabled the crippling of Equatorial Guinean society.

Exxon and malaria donations

ExxonMobil Foundation, the company's philanthropic arm, has committed US\$100 million through their Malaria Initiative since 2000 (28). The company focused on malaria having "witnessed firsthand the health and economic impact of malaria on our workforce, their families and the communities where we operate" and touts their status as "the largest non-pharmaceutical corporate donor to malaria research and development efforts" (28). We identified 33 groups receiving support from ExxonMobil through the company's website and press releases (Box 1, Appendix 1). The primary recipients of ExxonMobil donations are organizations based in the West and include several prominent foundations, humanitarian groups, and universities as well as bilateral and multilateral agencies (29). Their grants support a wide range of activities including advocacy, basic science, product development, and policy formation as well as bed net distribution and other operational activities in seven African nations (30). While grants of US\$10 million a year are not trivial, the amount is not substantial relative to either the budget of most national malaria control programs (including other international aid) or the extent of resources available to the company. The donated amount represents only 0.02% of ExxonMobil profit during the same period (18). In comparison, between 2001 and 2010, the company paid more than US\$674million in fines for violating Environmental Protection Agency regulations (31). Regardless, no amount of ExxonMobil support for development activities should stop public health workers from asking hard questions about, and demanding

accountability in, company actions. Instead of providing charity, corporate social responsibility should center on ethical business practices which prevent the damage the corporation may cause in the first place.

Corporations and public health

Funding for programs and research to improve health comes from many sources. Companies have an interest, and a role to play, in health efforts. Indeed, there is a long history of industry-public health collaboration, especially in malaria control, reflecting mutual concern and commitment to endemic communities (32–34). While a fundamental difference in mandate and purpose remains, the public sector is not always benign, nor is the private sector incompatible with the public good. Still, though the profit motive can be aligned with the public interest, it can be in opposition as well. In the case where company income is generated through practices or products which directly or indirectly harm health, subsequent health gains from available funding may not outweigh the harms of the product or practice. In Equatorial Guinea, the philanthropic activities by ExxonMobil and others have not overcome the negative impacts stemming from oil production or filled the unmet needs from chronic underinvestment in the social sector (11). In addition, such philanthropy simply helps foster patronage while enhancing donor-recipient relations and their public image (11). The acceptance of such funds by public health organizations, which generally retain the public's trust, risks lending legitimacy to organizations that harm health and undermines our own legitimacy.

The co-option of health efforts towards dissimilar and even disparate ends is not new. Similar concerns existed about the Rockefeller foundation, seen by some as a means to placate critics of Standard Oil, in the early 20th century (35). The best documented cases involve the tobacco industry's practice of 'white coating', i.e. where it "clothed itself in the respectability and goodwill of medical research and healthcare provision" (36). Recent analysis suggests large food and beverage corporations are adopting similar tactics (37). While ExxonMobil's malaria partnerships may not represent calculated efforts towards such a goal, the public relations end result is the same. The public, lawmakers, and company employees are communicated a sense of goodwill that encourages sales, removes regulatory pressure, and creates positive self-image leading to job satisfaction, respectively. Nonetheless, ExxonMobil has indeed employed deceptive marketing in the past, notably by creating front organizations to generate research and support advocacy on climate change skepticism (38). As the World Health Organization notes, in its guidelines on working with the commercial sector to improve health, "while some

degree of conflict of interest may be inescapable in public–private collaborations, the potential for conflicts is exacerbated by lack of transparency, and heightened by the appearance of deceit and/or manipulation” (39).

Managing conflicts of interest

In the general sense, conflict of interest can be seen as “competition between private/personal interests and those specific to a position of trust, and resides in the structure of situations as much as in the inclinations of individuals” (36). Interests include not only competing relationships that could influence actions, but also apparent interests that may bring objectivity into question and potential interests which any reasonable person may consider reporting. The preliminary step in its management is the identification of conflicted or competing interests. One standard approach is the use of disclosure of interest forms which may be unstructured or semi-structured. While self-reporting is an essential step, voluntary disclosure alone may be an insufficient screen. Self disclosure may be especially problematic when organizations, such as many corporate charities, are nominally separated from parent or sibling institutions who themselves are at risk of conflict of interests.

Difficulties in identifying conflicts of interest are particularly acute with commercial outfits and “reviews of governance arrangements for global health initiatives have consistently identified the inadequate attention paid to the screening of corporate partners and the management of potential conflicts of interest” (39). In the case of ExxonMobil Foundation, a review of required filings to the Internal Revenue Service and United States Securities and Exchange Commission revealed 14 of 17 board members are current or past executives of the parent corporation in 2010 (40). Additionally, income for the foundation is almost exclusively based on periodic cash contributions from the parent company as opposed to assets based on long-term holdings. We can only demonstrate that leadership and financial associations exist between the two organizations but not if, and how, they have influenced decisions. Nevertheless, by any reasonable criterion, potential conflicts of interest exist.

The presence of conflicts of interest does not necessarily preclude engagement. Conflicts of interest encompass a spectrum and require responses specific to the concern at hand. Recognizing this, the Roll Back Malaria program outlines a screening strategy for identified conflicts: 1) is the interest is relevant and if so, 2) is the interest significant? Three tiers of possible involvement are then defined - participation with disclosure, partial participation, and total exclusion – in their coalition depending on the nature of the conflicted interest (41). Even if

conflicts are not identified at the onset, it is possible to manage them appropriately afterwards. In an example involving the Gates Foundation, the Canadian International Development Research Centre, and the African Tobacco Control Alliance, the groups ended their partnership after recognition of conflicts of interest emerged (42). In past cases of foundations linked to companies, such as the Ford Foundation, separation of the charity from the parent company was central to overcoming these conflicts. Administrative separation and financial disinvestment may be appropriate for ExxonMobil Foundation to realize its humanitarian goals.

We conducted an e-mail survey about the conflict of interest policies and their application among recipients of ExxonMobil funds. The goal for the survey was to discuss screening policies, management strategies, and use results to improve and standardize conflict of interest policies across institutions involved in public health work. Responses to the survey were considered confidential and only aggregate data presented. The questionnaire consisted of five short questions: 1) Does the organization have guidelines for screening partners for conflicts of interest? 2) Are the guidelines publicly accessible? 3) Were guidelines used to assess any potential conflict of interests in partnering with ExxonMobil? 4) Were any conflicts of interest identified and if so, what were they? 5) How was each conflict of interest managed? We contacted 31 of the 33 funding recipients (September 14, 2011) through publically listed e-mail addresses for the organization or key individuals (list and contact information in Appendix 1). Only one ExxonMobil grantee completed the survey though two other organizations did reply to our request with additional queries. The absence of response by several public institutions, which are mandated to respond to public inquiry, was disappointing. The sole respondent reported they have a conflict of interest policy for sponsored work, it is publically accessible, it was used in screening the partnership with ExxonMobil, and no conflicts were identified. Overall, the results suggest discussing conflict of interests is not a priority for public health organizations and, when used, current policies may not be sufficient for identifying the full extent of possible conflicts.

Conclusions

If ExxonMobil is earnest about improving health and contributing to development, they must undertake the following steps: first, acknowledge responsibility, in part, for underdevelopment in Equatorial Guinea; second, confirm that company activities comply with ethical, in addition to legal, standards for the impact of extractive industries on local governments and environments; third, implement safeguards for future business, namely

transparent reporting of all deals with and payments to national agencies and officials; and finally, separate structures for charitable efforts from those of corporate management. Similarly, if the public health community hopes to improve health, we may do well to decline ExxonMobil support until the company completes these actions.

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Box 1. Organizations receiving ExxonMobil funds for malaria work

Organization
Academy for Educational Development Accordia
ADPP Angola Africa Fighting Malaria
African Leaders Malaria Alliance Africare
Americans for Oxford Inc. AMMREN
Benguela Malaria Consortium Cameroon Business Community Coalition against Malaria Tuberculosis and AIDS Clinton Foundation
Episcopal Relief and Development
Family Care Foundation Global Business Coalition
Harvard School of Public Health HopeXchange
Idol gives back International Organization for Migration
Jhpiego Malaria No More
Malaria Vaccine Initiative Medicines for Malaria Venture
Nets for Life Africa Nothing But Nets, UN Foundation
Pathfinder International Population Services International
President's Malaria Initiative Project Rwanda
Roll Back Malaria UCSF Global Health Group Malaria Elimination Group
UNICEF Chad
USAID
Zambezi Expedition

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Appendix 1: Sources for organizations receiving ExxonMobil support, type of organization, and email addresses used for survey contact

Academy for Educational Development	http://www.businesswire.com/news/home/20050707005089/en/ExxonMobil-Announces-Community-Investment-Initiative-Programs-Africa http://www.palgrave-journals.com/development/journal/v47/n3/full/1100070a.html	relogan@aed.org, dgreeley@aed.org	NGO
Accordia	http://www.exxonmobil.com/Corporate/Imports/health/community_malaria_partners.aspx	info@accordiafoundation.org, cspahn@accordiafoundation.org	Foundation
ADPP Angola	http://www.exxonmobil.com/Corporate/Imports/health/community_malaria_partners.aspx	adppsede@netangola.com	NGO
Africa Fighting Malaria	http://www.exxonsecrets.org/html/orofactsheet.php?id=125	rtren@fightingmalaria.org, rbate@aei.org	NGO
African Leaders malaria Alliance	http://www.news-medical.net/news/20110316/ALMA-receives-ExxonMobil-24250000-grant-to-combat-malaria.aspx	info@alma2015.org	Coalition
Africare	http://www.exxonmobil.com/Corporate/Imports/health/community_malaria_partners.aspx	info@africare.org, president@africare.org	NGO
Americans for Oxford Inc.	http://www.businesswire.com/news/home/20110425005024/en/ExxonMobil-Foundation-Marks-World-Malaria-Day-Increased	central@oxfordna.org	University
AMMREN	http://www.ammren.org/content/partners	seth.owusu-agyei@ghana-khrc.org , cbinka@gmail.com	NGO
Benguela Malaria Consortium	http://www.businesswire.com/news/home/20110425005024/en/ExxonMobil-Foundation-Marks-World-Malaria-Day-Increased	none	NGO
Cameroon Business Community Coalition against Malaria Tuberculosis and AIDS	http://www.businesswire.com/news/home/20110425005024/en/ExxonMobil-Foundation-Marks-World-Malaria-Day-Increased	none	Business
Clinton Foundation	http://www.clintonfoundation.org/download/?guid=0eebb714-f582-102b-aab4-00304860f676 http://foundationcenter.org/pnd/news/story.jhtml?id=224500025	chai.africa@clintonfoundation.org, osabot@clintonhealthaccess.org,	Foundation

Episcopal Relief and Development (ERD)	http://www.businesswire.com/news/home/20110425005024/en/ExxonMobil-Foundation-Marks-World-Malaria-Day-Increased	president@er-d.org , er-d@er-d.org	NGO
Family Care Foundation	http://www.businesswire.com/news/home/20110425005024/en/ExxonMobil-Foundation-Marks-World-Malaria-Day-Increased	fcf@familycare.org	NGO
Global Business Coalition	http://www.exxonmobil.com/Corporate/Imports/health/community_malaria_partners.aspx	dstearns@gbcimpact.org , info@businessfightsaids.org ,	NGO
Harvard School of Public Health	http://www.exxonmobil.com/Corporate/Imports/health/community_malaria_partners.aspx	deansoff@hsph.harvard.edu , harvardmalariainitiative@hsph.harvard.edu	University
HopeXchange	http://www.ammren.org/content/exxonmobil-supports-ultra-modern-malaria-diagnostic-laboratory-ghana	rome@hopexchange.net , admin@hopexchange.net	NGO
Idol gives back		idol.web@fox.com	NGO
International Organization for Migration	http://www.exxonmobil.com/Corporate/Imports/health/community_malaria_partners.aspx	hq@iom.int	UN
Jhpiego	http://www.exxonmobil.com/Corporate/Imports/health/community_malaria_partners.aspx	info@jhpiego.net	University
Malaria No More	http://www.exxonmobil.com/Corporate/Imports/health/community_malaria_partners.aspx	info@malarianomore.org.uk , info@malarianomore.org , webform	NGO
Malaria Vaccine Initiative	http://www.malariavaccine.org/preparing-mvaf.php http://www.exxonmobil.com/Corporate/Imports/health/community_malaria_partners.aspx	mvi_info@path.org , cloucq@malariavaccine.org	PDP
Medicines for Malaria Venture	http://www.exxonmobil.com/Corporate/Imports/health/community_malaria_partners.aspx	banerjij@mmv.org , reddyd@mmv.org	PDP
Nets for Life Africa	http://www.exxonmobil.com/Corporate/Imports/health/community_malaria_partners.aspx	info@netsforlifeafrica.org ,	NGO
Nothing But Nets, UN foundation	http://www.exxonmobil.com/Corporate/Imports/health/community_malaria_partners.aspx	info@nothingbutnets.net , njanati@unfoundation.org	UNFoundation
Pathfinder International	http://www.exxonmobil.com/Corporate/Imports/health/community_malaria_partners.aspx	lsuttenfield@pathfinder.org	NGO
Population Services International	http://www.exxonmobil.com/Corporate/Imports/health/community_malaria_partners.aspx	mstowell@psi.org , spiers@psimalaria.org ,	NGO
President's	http://www.fightingmalaria.org/press	askthemalariacoordin	Bilateral

Malaria Initiative	release.aspx?id=503	ator@usaid.gov,	
Project Rwanda	http://projectrwanda.org/news/exxon-supports-rwanda-malaria-outreach-program	info@projectrwanda.org	NGO
Roll Back Malaria	http://www.exxonmobil.com/Corporate/Imports/health/community_malaria_partners.aspx	inforbm@who.int, wilberforcea@who.int	UN
UCSF Global Health Group Malaria Elimination Group	http://www.exxonmobil.com/Corporate/Imports/health/community_malaria_partners.aspx http://foundationcenter.org/pnd/news/story.jhtml?id=224500025	feachemr@globalhealth.ucsf.edu, GoslingR@globalhealth.ucsf.edu, brasherse@globalhealth.ucsf.edu,	University
UNICEF Chad	http://www.businesswire.com/news/home/20110425005024/en/ExxonMobil-Foundation-Marks-World-Malaria-Day-Increased	ndjamena@unicef.org	Multilateral
USAID	http://www.exxonmobil.com/Corporate/Imports/health/community_malaria_partners.aspx	pinquiries@usaid.gov , chthomas@usaid.gov	Bilateral
Zambezi Expedition	http://www.zambezi-expedition.org/partners2.html	xverhooselh@who.int xhelge.bendl@zambezi-expedition.org	NGO