



THE AGAINST MALARIA FOUNDATION: HISTORY

The beginning

The Against Malaria Foundation came about from a few phone calls. Those calls were made in 2004 by Rob Mather to see if he could get 20 organisations to arrange for 5,000 people to swim and raise money to fight malaria. All 20 agreed. This was the starting point, not just of a worldwide swimming event that gathered more than 250,000 participants and raised US\$1.3 million, but of a totally new way of fighting malaria - giving ordinary citizens the power to take responsibility for fixing malaria themselves, playing a role alongside governments, multi-national institutions and NGOs.

The story really starts in 2003. Rob saw a TV documentary about a two year old girl, Terri Calvesbert, who had suffered 90 per cent burns in a housefire. He found the piece so moving he determined to see if he could raise money for Terri's trust fund to provide the medical support Terri would need in the years ahead. He called some of his friends to see if, between them, they could swim in a pool a distance equivalent to the English Channel. One thing led to another, and in the end more than 150 swims in 70 countries involving 10,000 people took part in [Swim for Terri](#). 100 per cent of the £200,000 raised went to Terri's trust fund.

One of things that impressed Rob was that support seemed to be coming from so many different places: a school of 700 children in Buenos Aires, people in Nepal and people in San Francisco. Once people bought-into what the swim was about, their desire to do something about it was huge. This planted a thought in his mind. Perhaps what had happened with the Swim for Terri could be applied to a much bigger issue. The difficulty was finding a big issue that none-the-less people could feel they could directly influence.

Malaria: the Big Issue

Malaria is different from almost every other global health issue because malaria is fixable. Three million people die from malaria every year, it is the world's single largest killer of children and pregnant women, yet all of these deaths can be prevented with some relatively simple steps - foremost of these being providing [bednets](#) for the most vulnerable to sleep under.

Rob decided he would try to get as many people as possible to buy-into the idea of fixing malaria, based on the simple, uncontroversial and effective step of providing millions of bednets. If you fund a bednet, you will protect vulnerable people and you will save lives.



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How to fix it?

This takes us back to the 20 phone calls. Instead of calling a few friends, as was the case with Swim For Terri, Rob decided to call 20 organisations. If each organisation would provide 5,000 people he could achieve 100,000 swimming and that would indicate the idea could be made bigger and was worth doing. The response he got was so positive this led Rob to believe not only that doing a much bigger swim was possible, but provided a clue as to how to preserve one of the fundamental principles of the Swim for Terri: that of ensuring 100 per cent of the money raised would buy bednets and not a penny would go towards administration, allowing people to know every penny they raised would make a difference.

Creating an organisation that can promise to ensure funds raised don't get swallowed-up in administration and infrastructure is fine on a relatively small scale, but would it be possible to preserve this on a big scale for a big problem? After all, no other organisation has been able to operate on a global scale without also incurring significant costs.

That's worth highlighting: how many organisations can demonstrate that 100 per cent of the funds they receive from the public goes directly to benefit the people who need it?

With each bednet costing only US\$5, even a child's pocket money could fight malaria, provided none of that small but valuable contribution was lost in administration.

Zero costs

The answer lay in the willingness Rob had found from those 20 organisations to organise swims. Perhaps they could also be asked to take care of things like banking, website hosting, accounting and legal work. So Rob picked up the phone again. Pricewaterhouse Coopers agreed to handle all accounting pro bono and also seconded Sean Good, a senior accountant. Allen & Overy, a leading law firm, did all the legals for free and now 17 legal firms help around the world and Rob has never paid a legal bill. Citibank took care of banking, Microsoft provided technology support and Speedo looked after marketing. In total more than 150 companies agreed to help and the very few costs he couldn't avoid were covered by some private donors. In this way it was possible to continue to guarantee every penny raised buys nets and not a single penny raised is spent on administration.

And so the 2005 World Swim Against Malaria was launched.



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Managing lots of people and lots of bednets

Rob had solved the issue of organisation and structure, but other problems remained. For example, how to make it easy for groups of people all over the

world to get involved, to feel connected to everyone else participating and also to feel connected to the people whose lives they would be protecting. And how do you set up a distribution chain that would ensure thousands of nets were purchased at the lowest possible price and then given to the right people?

The distribution issue was solved by identifying the many organisations, both big and small, already working on the ground and with track record of getting bednets to the right people. Rob set up a [simple system](#) whereby these organisations could apply to receive nets. But written into this system was a legal commitment to guarantee nets went to the places the organisations said they would, when they said they would, plus a requirement to provide pictures of the distribution. The Red Cross was the first to take up this offer, others followed and there are now 22 such [distribution partners](#) who all follow the AMF distribution rules which guarantee total accountability, efficiency and transparency.

The next issue was getting bednets. Rob managed to persuade [Vestergaard Frandsen](#), one of the world's largest bednet manufacturers, to supply him with long-lasting insecticidal nets at a world-lowest price of approximately \$5 per net.

The last part of the jigsaw puzzle was making it easy for people all over the world to take part. They needed something that helped them sign-up participants, took care of the money but also allowed them to see who else was involved. Rob also believed it was critical for the whole process to be transparent, not just in terms of participation but the whole distribution process, right down to pictures of each distribution of nets taking place.

In managing the Swim for Terri, Rob had asked his friend, Andrew Garner to create a website which was the one thing that really allowed the process to expand so rapidly and successfully. Rob and Andrew realised that a more developed website would be the key to the success of a World Swim. Rob approached Microsoft and asked if they could host the website for free. They said yes and also brought in a partner company, Attenda.



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Andrew created a [site](#) that allows participants to create their own space to raise money and also share their experiences through pictures. It also allows people to see which bednet distribution their money has contributed to, track its status and actually see the nets being delivered in pictures and often video. It even allows people to see the proposals submitted by the distribution partners as well as their delivery reports. But, most importantly, the site works as a way of bringing people together, to see they have the power to change things and that as a group they are a force to be reckoned with.

Making people part of the solution

What started off as a process to try and solve some logistical problems ended up creating a hugely efficient way of mass funding and distributing of bed nets. It created the possibility individuals could collectively play a significant role in fixing malaria - avoiding the bottleneck of governments and the inefficiencies of international institutions. For the first time, a single individual could play a direct role in helping to fix malaria, rather than relying on someone else to do something on their behalf.

With this system in place, Rob set-off to find participants for the first World Swim. Through his own persistence and the enthusiasm and support from a diverse range of organisations from swimming clubs and associations, through to multi-national organisations, more than 250,000 people from 124 countries took part in activities raising more than US\$1.3 million. Most of these were swims of some sort, but some were not, including a sale of handbags and a poetry recital.

Nets were distributed in 28 countries and a conservative estimate would put the number of lives these nets would save at 13,000.



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Building on success

Things didn't slow down after the swim. Groups of people and organisations starting approaching Rob to see if they could incorporate their own fundraising initiatives into the structure Rob had built - attracted by the efficiency and transparency of the process. This led to the creation of a series of initiatives under the 'Against Malaria' banner that all share the same vision and focus: ensuring 100 per cent of the money raised buys bednets that end-up over heads and beds.

- [Madness Against Malaria](#) - an unique fundraising competition, where teams compete against each other
- [Fast Against Malaria](#) - where people fast for one day, to raise money
- [MyBednet.com](#) – a roll-call, where people are invited to donate just one bed net each
- [AuzzieMozzie](#) - a fundraising and education initiative organised by schools in Australia
- [AgainstMalaria.com](#) - the parent website where people can create pages and fundraise in whatever way this wish.

This has meant that the total number of people who have participated in Against Malaria initiatives, as of March 2008, is close to 300,000, more than US\$2.5 million has been raised and more then 500,000 nets have either been distributed or are on their way, protecting more than one million (mainly) children.

World Swim Against Malaria 2008

We are now in the run-up to World Swim Against Malaria 2008. The aim is to achieve one million people swimming - using 5 April as a time to get the attention of the world's media.

Whereas last time around the focus was on word-of-mouth and targeting specific organisations, this time around the challenge is to generate a significant amount of publicity so the word spreads and as many people as possible participate.

So we ask two things – spread the word by passing on our website address or subscribing to our Information Hub. You can also [buy a net](#), or [make a donation](#), or you could [participate in a](#) swim or sponsor a participant.

Malaria is fixable.

March 2008