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Case Study

Sharing Power

How Merck and the WHO have sustained a fragile balance of power in their battle against river blindness

By Jonathan B. Levine

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SHARING

How Merck and the WHO have sustained a fragile balance of power in their battle against river blindness

BRENDA COLATRELLA, an executive of the multinational pharmaceutical giant Merck & Co., remembers being stunned at a meeting back in 1996 by a proposal made by a colleague at the World Health Organization (WHO). Since 1987, Merck and the WHO had been partners in an innovative program to eliminate onchocerciasis, a leading cause of blindness in the developing world. Merck's donations of its breakthrough drug Mectizan, with the WHO's technical support, had already saved millions of Africa's poor from the scourge known as "river blindness," using distribution by mobile drug-delivery teams of health professionals from numerous nongovernmental organizations. Though it was an unsustainable method in the long run to treat the estimated 120 million people at risk of contracting the disease across 35 countries,¹ it had been quite successful

over its first nine years of operation.

But at the 1996 meeting, in Geneva, the WHO's research team was proposing a radical and untested delivery strategy that Colatrella feared could upset the whole effort: to let local communities select their own health workers – usually lay volunteers with unproven capacity and reliability – to distribute the drug and monitor patient care.

To Colatrella's Western sensibilities, the proposal was unfathomable. "It defied every protocol we lived by, starting with the fact that trained physicians administered prescription drugs, lay people did not," she recalls thinking. "I nearly fell off my chair." What if the local, typically illiterate workers improperly dosed the medication, she worried, or failed to accurately record adverse reactions? The Food and Drug Administration, to which Merck ultimately answered as a U.S. company, could pull the plug on the program altogether.

And what if Mectizan seeped into

How can organizations in public-private partnerships, with very different cultures and missions, find common ground on critical issues of strategy?

What are the chief concerns of corporate donors, and how do they influence decision making in public-private partnerships?

When should partners attempt to exert, cede, or compromise control over program decisions?

What are some principles to guide successful power sharing in partnerships?

by JONATHAN B. LEVINE

