

HEALTH

rolling back malaria

National Grid has committed itself to tackling a disease that kills more than one million Africans every year and has the potential severely to affect the health of its workforce in northern Zambia. The programme forms part of a wider corporate social responsibility effort wherever it operates

At first sight, it seems odd that a company best known for its network of electricity pylons across England and Wales is playing a key role in helping to rid an area of northern Zambia from a tiny but deadly insect. But National Grid has come a long way in the 12 years since it was spun out of the public electricity industry as a private company. In common with some other electricity sector companies, it has since expanded into new markets, both in the UK and overseas.

National Grid now has extensive interests in the US and runs joint ventures in Argentina, Brazil, Chile and Poland. However, when the fast-expanding international firm moved into Zambia in a joint venture with a US partner to upgrade the power network in the country's main copper-mining area, it ran into a problem – the anopheles mosquito, which carries the microscopic parasites that cause malaria.

Malaria kills nearly a million Africans a year, according to the World Health Organization. In Zambia alone, up to 20 per cent of the deaths in the country's hospitals are as a result of malaria, which

the company

National Grid transmits electricity to 50 million people and operates gas and telecommunications networks, principally in England, Wales and the US. Based in London, the company has 13,000 staff and had operating profits of £875million (\$1.259bn) on turnover of £4.4billion in 2001/02. It:

- published *Connecting with the future*, its first combined economic, social and environmental report, in July 2002
- has invested more than £9m in community projects in the last year
- donated 81 hectares (200 acres) of waterfront land on Rhode Island in the US to a local government department in April 2001 to ensure that it remained undeveloped
- runs a 'Welfare to Work Programme' in the US which recruits, trains and supports people on benefits
- has 12 environmental education centres at UK substation sites, run in partnership with public or charitable bodies, where children learn about their local environment and wider sustainability issues.

■ National Grid is using a combination of spraying and improved drainage to try to eradicate the mosquito from northern Zambia, where it has a network of electricity pylons and employs local people to look after its substations



can lead to severe anaemia, organ damage, convulsions, coma and death if untreated.

'We knew malaria was going to be a problem in the area, but we hadn't appreciated just how much of one,' says Gareth Llewellyn, National Grid's director of safety and environment. 'To give you an idea, when one of our employees with responsibility for environment and safety went there for six months on secondment he had malaria four times – and he was taking anti-malarial drugs.'

The company's 300 staff members in the area are responsible for maintaining a network of substations near the border with the Democratic Republic of Congo, many of which are in swampy areas. This puts them in the malarial frontline. At any one time 30-40 per cent of the patients in the wards at the main hospital at Kitwe, the main town in the area, are suffering from the disease.

So the company decided to do something about it. This, however, was not for purely commercial reasons. Nor was it a matter of protecting a handful of expat staff from a notable African killer – almost all the employees of

Copperbelt Energy Corporation, the partnership National Grid has formed with the US company Cinergy, are local people.

'This was a problem for our staff and obviously anything we can do to help them in that respect is important,' says Llewellyn.

'Safeguarding our employees by providing a healthy working environment is a core value for National Grid wherever we operate in the world. But in Zambia malaria is one of the biggest problems for the society from which our employees are drawn. And it's a huge problem for Africa as a whole'.

As a result of its experience in Zambia, the company became involved in the Roll Back Malaria programme, a global partnership of governments, companies, research groups and international agencies – such as the World Health Organization – that works in Africa and other continents.

To tackle the disease, National Grid uses a combination of spraying with insecticide and improving drainage. 'We've integrated both control methods into our maintenance programmes, so that when our staff carry out maintenance work on a substation, for example, they also spray to kill mosquitoes. DDT, though banned in many countries, is permitted for use against malaria in Africa. The company does not use it, preferring the more expensive but less environmentally damaging insecticide Fendona.

Drainage, though, is the most important control against malaria because it removes the breeding grounds of the insect. 'In those areas where the drainage from our sites goes into swampy areas, we have a programme of directing it to rivers and other

watercourses that are not mosquito breeding grounds', says Llewellyn.

Its ongoing programme to eradicate malaria is not the only way that National Grid is demonstrating corporate social responsibility in Zambia. The work is part of a wider programme to improve the health of the country's ten million people. Earlier this summer National Grid agreed to provide \$10,000 (£6370) to refurbish the children's wards at the hospital in Kitwe, and has set up a factory to process maize with profits going to a local orphanage.

In a country where the average life expectancy has fallen from 50 to 37 years over the past 15 years, and where 63 per cent of the population lives on or under \$1 a day, according to the United Nations Development Programme, such small-scale local community initiatives can be the most effective. Their value to the society is often out of all proportion to the actual cost.

Nor is National Grid's work in Zambia an isolated instance of its ambition to build shareholder value in a socially responsible manner. In July 2002 the company published its first CSR report, which details National Grid's activity in other parts of the world and features a visionary Framework for Responsible Business. The company consulted more than 4000 stakeholders and staff and their views played an important part in developing the framework, which states: '[Shareholder] value is based not only on the financial returns we provide, but also on the way in which we treat the environment, our employees and the communities in which we operate.'

Back in Zambia, will the multinational heavyweight defeat an insect weighing less than a gram? Llewellyn makes no promises, but he is cautiously optimistic. 'Malaria was eradicated in that part of Zambia in the 1970s. So it's been done before.'

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malaria is a huge problem for the society from which our employees are drawn, as it is for the whole of Africa

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National Grid's participation in the global partnership for Roll Back Malaria shows how a company can do both itself and a local community good at the same time. The debate about whether companies should play a role that is traditionally expected of government (at least in the case of countries in the West) becomes academic when the business and social benefits are so obvious and so closely aligned.

features of note include:

- joined-up thinking as evidenced by the Framework for Responsible Business, which involved extensive stakeholder consultation
- increasing the overall effectiveness of the work in Zambia through involvement in an ongoing, larger-scale programme
- taking both a short and long-term approach to the problem
- control measures against malarial mosquitoes are integrated within the regular maintenance programme at company substations.

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