Quality Assurance and Quality Control in the Global Trachoma Mapping Project

Anthony W. Solomon,1,2* Rebecca Willis,3 Alexandre L. Pavluck,3 Wondu Alemayehu,4,5 Ana Bakhtiari,6 Sarah Bovill,6 Brian K. Chu,7 Paul Courtwright,7 Michael Dejene,6 Philip Downs,5 Rebecca M. Flueckiger,7 Danny Haddad,6,10 P. J. Hooper,3 Khumbo Kalua,11 Biruck Kebede,12 Amir Bedri Kello,13 Colin K. Macleod,6 Siobhan McCullagh,6 Tom Millar,7 Tom Mpyet,7,14,15 Jeremiah Ngond,16,17 Benjamin Nwobi,18 Nicholas Olobio,7 Uwazoeke Onyebuchi,18 Lisa A. Rotondo,17 Boubacar Sarr,19 Omer Shafi,12 Oliver Sokana,20 Sheila K. West,21 and Allen Foster1 for the Global Trachoma Mapping Project

Clinical Research Department, London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, London, United Kingdom; 2London Centre for Neglected Tropical Disease Research, London, United Kingdom; 3Task Force for Global Health, Decatur, Georgia; 4The Fred Hollows Foundation Ethiopia, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia; 5Berhan Public Health and Eye Care Consultancy, Addis Adaba, Ethiopia; 6Sightsavers, Haywards Heath, West Sussex, United Kingdom; 7Ilirianaro Centre for Community Ophthalmology, Division of Ophthalmology, University of Cape Town, Cape Town, South Africa; 8Michael Dejene Public Health Consultancy Services, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia; 9Emory Eye Center, Atlanta, Georgia; 10Orbis International, New York, New York; 11Blantyre Institute for Community Outreach, Blantyre, Malawi; 12Federal Ministry of Health, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia; 13Light for the World, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia; 14Sightsavers Nigeria, Kaduna, Nigeria; 15Department of Ophthalmology, Jos University, Jos, Nigeria; 16The Carter Center, Atlanta, Georgia; 17RTI International, Washington, District of Columbia; 18National Trachoma Control Program, Department of Public Health, Federal Ministry of Health, Abuja, Nigeria; 19Ministère de la Santé et de la Prévention Médicale, Dakar, Senegal; 20EyeCare Department, Ministry of Health, Honiara, Solomon Islands; 21Dana Center for Preventive Ophthalmology, The Wilmer Institute, Johns Hopkins School of Medicine, Baltimore, Maryland

Abstract. In collaboration with the health ministries that we serve and other partners, we set out to complete the multiple-country Global Trachoma Mapping Project. To maximize the accuracy and reliability of its outputs, we needed in-built, practical mechanisms for quality assurance and quality control. This article describes how those mechanisms were created and deployed. Using expert opinion, computer simulation, working groups, field trials, progressively accumulated in-project experience, and external evaluations, we developed 1) criteria for where and where not to undertake population-based prevalence surveys for trachoma; 2) three iterations of a standardized training and certification system for field teams; 3) a customized Android phone–based data collection app; 4) comprehensive support systems; and 5) a secure end-to-end pipeline for data upload, storage, cleaning by objective data managers, analysis, health ministry review and approval, and online display. We are now supporting peer-reviewed publication. Our experience shows that it is possible to quality control and quality assure prevalence surveys in such a way as to maximize comparability of prevalence estimates between countries and permit high-speed, high-fidelity data processing and storage, while protecting the interests of health ministries.

INTRODUCTION

Trachoma is the leading infectious cause of blindness.1 To help direct global elimination of trachoma as a public health problem by 2020,2 the Global Trachoma Mapping Project (GTMP) aimed to complete the baseline trachoma map worldwide.3 Technical, scientific, and financial oversight to the GTMP was provided through a complex network of partners with complementary mandates, skills, and capacities, including national governments, academic institutions, and nongovernmental organizations. A true international collaboration,4 the GTMP delivered high-quality5 population-based prevalence data on trachoma at unprecedented speed and scale.

Although the singular form of the word “project” is used in its title, the GTMP was actually a series of 55 trachoma mapping projects, each of which mapped between one6–9 and 910 evaluation units (EUs) for trachoma. A project covered the trachoma mapping needs of a whole country, or of a regional state (Ethiopia) or state (Nigeria). In some projects, a phased approach was used, initially mapping a small number of EUs in which the likelihood of trachoma being a public health problem was felt to be the greatest, on the basis that mapping might be extended if prevalence was found to be high and not extended if it was not. Individual projects were owned and operated by health ministries or the local equivalent.10,11 Each EU was mapped using a population-based prevalence survey powered to be 95% confident of detecting an expected 10% prevalence of the sign “trachomatous inflammation—follicular”12 in 1- to 9-year-olds, with absolute precision of 3% and a design effect of 2.65.10

The template methodology has been described in detail elsewhere.10 The present article documents the steps that were taken in each constituent project, and at global level, to adhere to the tenets of that template and to try to maximize the accuracy and application of the output. In the spirit of full disclosure, it also lists quality assurance and quality control measures that we did not take, either because doing so would have been too expensive or impractical or because the prompt to do so came with experience. Some measures in the latter category have been introduced for baseline, impact, and surveillance trachoma prevalence surveys supported by Tropical Data (www.tropicaldata.org),13,14 following the end of the GTMP.

METHODS

Expert opinion, distilled through a series of teleconferences of the GTMP’s Methodologies and Prioritization Working Groups,10 was used to develop criteria for where to map and where not to map. We used computer simulation to confirm that population-based prevalence surveys were needed for mapping,15 rather than a quicker and epidemiologically dirtier approach. We held meetings and teleconferences of each of the four Working Groups (Methodologies, Prioritization, Tools, and Training), and convened the GTMP Advisory Committee to oversee development of pilot systems that were then trialed
Preemptive and corrective measures put in place by the GTMP to avoid pitfalls inherent in trachoma mapping: issues relating to the scope of mapping

| No. | The GTMP ... | ... To reduce the impact of, or avoid ... | Examples of instances where this measure helped (or might have helped) |
|-----|-------------|-----------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1   | Systematically discussed countries (and administrative divisions within countries) with individuals who had local knowledge, in an effort to uncover available evidence for possible trachoma endemicity, with documentation of evidence, and action where needed | Lack of expressed need to map in areas where mapping is needed | Delay in identification of endemic areas, delay in elimination program initiation, and failure to achieve GET2020 | The GTMP systematically discussed the need for trachoma surveys in the Democratic Republic of the Congo with key informants and the Ministère de la Santé. In 1982, a study of prevalence and causes of blindness and low vision was conducted in eight provinces of Indonesia; trachoma was one of the top 10 causes; by 2013, trachoma had disappeared (unpublished Indonesia Ministry of Health data) |
| 2   | (Where evidence to justify mapping was of low quality) undertake for mapping using a phased approach | Failure to take into account prevalence estimates in adjacent areas, as they accrued, in decision-making on whether there was a need to map | Excessive use of resources to document the absence of trachoma at baseline, or delay in identification of endemic areas, delay in elimination program initiation, and failure to achieve GET2020 | The GTMP phased survey rollout in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Yemen (manuscript in preparation) and Zimbabwe |
| 3   | (Where evidence to justify mapping was completely absent but suspicion of trachoma existed) provided technical and financial support to undertake preliminary survey work to determine whether baseline population-based prevalence surveys were needed | Expressed need to map in areas where mapping was not needed | Excessive use of resources to document the absence of trachoma at baseline | The GTMP undertook preliminary survey work in Tanzania to rule out areas unlikely to have trachoma as a public health problem |
| 4   | Used a positive trachoma rapid assessment or other positive preliminary data on the presence of trachoma to initiate support for a population-based prevalence survey in the corresponding administrative area, as soon as possible | Assumption that data from a trachoma rapid assessment provide prevalence estimates | Maximally biased estimate of prevalence potentially used for programmatic decision-making | The GTMP undertook preliminary survey work in Papua New Guinea to provide evidence to justify population-based prevalence surveys |
| 5   | Initiated contact with health ministries of countries that may have been trachoma endemic (and responded to countries that reached out to us on learning about the GTMP), then engaged in discussions to determine whether mapping was needed | Countries being isolated from the international trachoma community | Delay in identification of endemic areas, delay in elimination program initiation, and failure to achieve GET2020 | Colombia identified trachoma in communities in the Amazon rainforest, near to the border with Brazil, between 2003 and 2006, but limited international engagement occurred until the GTMP visited in 2013 |
| 6   | Undertook detailed discussions with health ministries over the benefits and risks associated with using the standardized systems and approaches of the GTMP for trachoma mapping, as opposed to completing trachoma mapping via other means | Incomplete uptake of standardized systems and approaches developed by the GTMP, and/or the incomplete use of funds allocated to the GTMP | Heterogeneity of approaches and/or failure to meet donors’ expectations | The GTMP did this for the duration of its operation |
| 7   | Channeled financial resources donated by bilateral organizations to undertake baseline trachoma mapping in any country where baseline mapping was justified | Domestic funds available to map insufficient to meet clear needs | Delay in identification of endemic areas, delay in elimination program initiation, and failure to achieve GET2020 | A national survey of blindness, low vision, and trachoma in Ethiopia in 2005–2006 showed that trachoma was highly and widely endemic in Oromia, the largest regional state. But by 2012, survey work had been undertaken in only 10 of Oromia’s then-current 266 rural districts. The GTMP supported mapping of the rest of the regional state |

(continued)
in the field in Oromia, Ethiopia, in October 2012.10 The training system, electronic data collection app and field methodologies were all subsequently refined and enhanced as a result of this experience.

The GTMP was formally launched on December 17, 2012, and supported trachoma prevalence survey fieldwork until January 19, 2016, operating in a total of 29 countries. It acquired and processed data on 625,541 households and 2,667,457 examined people. Improvements were progressively introduced during rollout, with identification of issues that warranted improvement facilitated by weekly teleconferences of the core GTMP team, 10 periodic meetings of the Advisory Committee, and formal midterm and end-of-project evaluations by (different) external consultants.

RESULTS

The criteria used for determining where to map and where not to map are given in the Panel. The original field team training manual16 was superseded by two revisions: version 2 from May 24, 2013,17 and version 3 from August 15, 2014,18 with projects beginning after those dates using the updated versions. Quality assurance and quality control points used in the GTMP’s systems and methodologies are presented in a series of tables, covering issues relating to scope of mapping (Table 1); survey methodology (Supplemental Table 1), planning, budgeting, and logistics (Supplemental Table 2); training (Supplemental Table 3); survey implementation and field support (Supplemental Table 4); data entry (Supplemental Table 5); data management (Supplemental Table 6); data storage (Supplemental Table 7); and interpretation, reporting, and application of results (Supplemental Table 8). Common to all of these system details was a sequence of development through expertise and experience, consensus building, process design, operationalization, feedback, and follow-up. Measures were put in place through a combination of first-principles thinking (e.g., Supplemental Table 3, row 1), critical review of our own and others’ previous work (e.g., Supplemental Table 1, row 4), and progressively accumulated experience (e.g., Supplemental Table 2, row 2).

DISCUSSION

“An expert,” Niels Bohr is reported to have said, “is a person who has found out by their own painful experience all the

| No. | The GTMP... | Co-endemic diseases with data needs not mapped with baseline surveys | Related to the critical review of our own and others’ previous work (e.g., Supplemental Table 2, row 2). | Examples of instances where this measure helped (or might have helped) |
|-----|-------------|-------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------|
| 8   | Encouraged health ministries to piggyback collection of data on other diseases of local importance, advocated to funders to secure permission to do so, and provided technical support to adjust fieldwork protocols and data collection tools as needed | Co-endemic diseases with data needs not mapped with baseline surveys | Lost opportunity for achieving efficiencies in the use of human and financial resources | In two EUs of the Solomon Islands and one EU of Vanuatu, the GTMP collected population-based data on the prevalence of yaws and trachoma at the same time6,30,31 |
| 9   | Supplemented hour-by-hour communication with weekly formal teleconferences of the core project group, to review progress and plan activities, country by country | Centralization of information and decision-making in the hands of one individual or one partner organization | Lost opportunities to benefit from complimentary experiences and to hear dissenting voices | The GTMP held weekly formal teleconferences for the duration of its operation |

GE120202 = global elimination of trachoma as a public health problem by 2020; GTMP = Global Trachoma Mapping Project; EU = evaluation unit.

Panel

Criteria for where to map and where not to map used by the GTMP, 2012–2016.

Where to map:
- where, on the basis of historical data on trachoma in that district, current data on trachoma in adjacent districts, socioeconomic conditions, and access to water and sanitation, the population is very likely to be trachoma endemic; or
- where trachiasis surgery is being performed by local health-care providers; or
- where individuals with trachiasis are presenting to local health-care providers; or
- where individuals with trachiasis are being identified as part of community outreach campaigns

Where not to map:
- where there is no justification to believe trachoma might be endemic, based on the previously discussed data; or
- where epidemiologically valid prevalence data collected within the last 10 years are already available; or
- where undertaking mapping might put field teams at a security risk; or
- where the responsible authorities, following in-depth discussions, do not prioritize elimination of trachoma as a public health problem
mistakes that one can make in a very narrow field. In that sense, we regard ourselves as approaching expert status in the conduct of population-based prevalence surveys in developing countries. The “painful experience” part of our journeys to this point means that this article was not written to give its authors an opportunity to claim epidemiological superiority over those who have designed, supervised, participated in, or paid for population-based trachoma surveys conducted outside the GTMP. During the course of our careers, we have scattered survey design flaws over the trachoma-endemic globe; we have tried to document those mistakes here. Within the GTMP, we still did not achieve perfection, having had to balance our desire to achieve it with the knowledge that doing so would have reduced efficiency. As a particular example, we are aware that GTMP field teams often failed to enumerate residents who were eligible to be examined but did not participate, despite the fact that our system facilitated it and our field team training system specified doing so. We think that the team members were anxious that they would face supervisors’ criticism if they achieved much less than 100% enrolment, which is a training and communication issue that we tried (and continue to try) to address; we believed that pausing fieldwork to alter enumeration habits would not have been productive. It should also be noted that a proportion of the potential problems that we list in the table as things that we attempted to avoid or correct in the GTMP are actually ghosts-of-problems-future that we have not necessarily yet encountered in real life. However, recognizing and confronting both previous failures and near-misses is important, and this article is an attempt to comprehensively catalog both the errors that we prevented or detected using the systems and methodologies of the GTMP and those that we continue to make and will try to eliminate, where possible, in the next phase of the GTMP, therefore, we attempted to ensure that all phases of the implementation process had been planned to the fullest possible extent, with decisions made for one phase complementary to decisions made for the others; this article in part demonstrates the fruit of those efforts. As a high-profile endeavor within the neglected tropical diseases sector, within which there are many competing priorities, failure of the GTMP’s systems to work as promised might have had reputational consequences for progress against trachoma internationally.

In that context, implementation of a purely electronic data pathway from collection through to display and application carried some risk, both in terms of risk of failure of a system built specifically to serve the GTMP, and in terms of the challenge of convincing scores of health ministries and other partner organizations to simultaneously jump with us from paper to silicon. An occasional objection raised was that without paper forms, we would not have the “original record” and would, therefore, be unable to investigate apparent problems in the data; this objection ignores the fact that irreducible errors are also made when recording data on paper, including many (such as skipped fields, out-of-range values, and illegible handwriting) that our app prevented by design. We believe that our recorders’ error rate (estimated on the basis of the data on trichiasis in children—all reports of which were verified [Supplemental Table 4, row 3]—at 1.4 errors per 10,000 keystrokes) compares favorably with previously published data on error rates of data entry operators. Rabbitt found that when individuals were asked to electronically record answers to a question with two possible responses (an analogy from our surveys would be, “Is there trichiasis in the right eye?”), the observed error rate was 60 per 10,000. An outstanding question is whether estimates of trachomatous trichiasis prevalence in adults should be automatically corrected downward to account for the inevitability of these occasional errors, on the basis that when recording the presence or absence of a rare event, erroneous entries are considerably more likely to bias prevalence estimates upward than downward. The aforementioned question may leave the impression that we felt that we engaged in a high-stakes game by setting up to complete the GTMP and choosing electronic data capture. We would, therefore, be remiss if we failed to acknowledge that (other than in terms of scale and standardization) the GTMP was the setting for an evolution rather than a revolution in trachoma surveys. Our collective efforts outlined here owe much to others. We think we have built on that previous work by making electronic data capture the emerging standard for neglected tropical disease epidemiology, by highlighting the need for certification of clinical examination accuracy in field surveys, by emphasizing data quality, and by the measures that we have undertaken to ensure local ownership. Supporting health ministries to fulfill their mandate to lead and encouraging appropriate contributions and buy-in from all relevant stakeholders are extremely important issues in their own right. They are also an important step to quality assure future prevalence surveys (which will be required to assess the impact of interventions on progress toward elimination) because increasing local capacity creates more equal partnerships that will be primed to work together on robust survey designs in the next round. We are open to constructive criticism from and future collaboration with others and look forward to continuing to adapt and improve as we work toward a world in which surveys to estimate the prevalence of trachoma eventually become unnecessary.

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The Global Trachoma Mapping Project Investigators are Agatha Aboe, Liknaw Adamu, Wondu Alemayehu, Menbere Alemu, Neal D. E. Alexander, Ana Bakhtiani, Berhanu Bero, Sarah Bovill, Simon Bush, Brian K. Chu, Paul Courtwright, Michael Dejene, Paul M. Emerson, Rebecca M. Flueckiger, Allen Foster, Solomon Gadisa, Katherine Gass, Teshome Gebre, Zelalem Habtamu, Danny Haddad, Erik Harvey, Dominic Haslam, Khuomo Kalua, Amir B. Kello, Jonathan D. King, Richard Le Mesurier, Susan Lewallen, Thomas M. Lietman, Chad MacArthur, Colin Macleod, Silvio P. Maritoti, Anna Massey, Elias Mathieu, Siobhain McCullagh, Addis Mekasha, Tom Millar, Caleb Mpyet, Beatrix Muñoz, Jeremiah Ngondi, Stephanie Ogden, Alex Pauvlick, Joseph Pearce, Serge Resnikoff, Virginia Sarah, Boubacar Sarr, Alemayehu Sisay, Jennifer L. Smith, Anthony W. Solomon, Jo Thomson, Sheila K. West, and Rebecca Willis. Authors’ addresses: Anthony W. Solomon, Control of Neglected Tropical Diseases, World Health Organization, Geneva, Switzerland; E-mail: solomon@who.int; Rebecca Willis, Alexandre L. Pauvlick, Ana Bakhtiani, Brian K. Chu, and P. J. Hooper, Task Force for Global Health, Decatur, GA; E-mails: rwillis@taskforce.org, apauckland@vaccine.org, abakhtiani@taskforce.org, bcchu@taskforce.org, and phooper@taskforce.org. Wondu Alemayehu, The Fred Hollows Foundation, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, and Berhan Public Health and Eye Care Consultancy, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia; E-mail: alemayehu@fhsfoundation.com. Sarah Njogu, Philip Donnelly, K. Macleod, Siobhain McCullagh, and Tom Millar, Sightsavers, Haywards Heath, West Sussex, United Kingdom; E-mails: sbovill@sightsavers.org, pmillar@sightsavers.org, and tmillar@sightsavers.org. Paul Courtwright, Division of Ophthalmology, Kijili-Majano Centre for Community Ophthalmology, University of Cape Town, Cape Town, South Africa, E-mail: pcoutright@kxco.net. Michael Dejene, Michael Dejene Public Health Consultancy Services, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia; E-mail: michael.dejene@gmail.com. Rebecca M. Flueckiger, Faculty of Infectious and Tropical Diseases, London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, London, United Kingdom, and Task Force for Global Health, Decatur, GA; E-mail: r.m.flueckiger@gmail.com. Danny Haddad, Emory Eye Center, Emory University, Atlanta, GA; E-mail: dhadadd@emory.edu. Khuumo Kalua, Blantyre Institute for Community Outreach, Blantyre, Malawi; E-mail: director@bicomalawi.org. Biruck Kebede, Federal Ministry of Health, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia; E-mail: biruck1@gmail.com. Amir Bedri Kello, Light for the World, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, E-mail: amirbedrikello@gmail.com. Caleb Mpyet, Sightsavers Nigeria, Kaduna, Nigeria, Department of Ophthalmology, Jos University, Jos, Nigeria, and Division of Ophthalmology, Kijili-Majano Centre for Community Ophthalmology, University of Cape Town, Cape Town, South Africa, E-mail: amirbedrikello@gmail.com. Caleb Mpyet, Sightsavers Nigeria, Kaduna, Nigeria, Department of Ophthalmology, Jos University, Jos, Nigeria, and Division of Ophthalmology, Kijili-Majano Centre for Community Ophthalmology, University of Cape Town, Cape Town, South Africa, E-mail: amirbedrikello@gmail.com. Caleb Mpyet, Sightsavers Nigeria, Kaduna, Nigeria, Department of Ophthalmology, Jos University, Jos, Nigeria, and Division of Ophthalmology, Kijili-Majano Centre for Community Ophthalmology, University of Cape Town, Cape Town, South Africa, E-mail: amirbedrikello@gmail.com. Caleb Mpyet, Sightsavers Nigeria, Kaduna, Nigeria, Department of Ophthalmology, Jos University, Jos, Nigeria, and Division of Ophthalmology, Kijili-Majano Centre for Community Ophthalmology, University of Cape Town, Cape Town, South Africa, E-mail: amirbedrikello@gmail.com. Caleb Mpyet, Sightsavers Nigeria, Kaduna, Nigeria, Department of Ophthalmology, Jos University, Jos, Nigeria, and Division of Ophthalmology, Kijili-Majano Centre for Community Ophthalmology, University of Cape Town, Cape Town, South Africa, E-mail: amirbedrikello@gmail.com. Caleb Mpyet, Sightsavers Nigeria, Kaduna, Nigeria, Department of Ophthalmology, Jos University, Jos, Nigeria, and Division of Ophthalmology, Kijili-Majano Centre for Community Ophthalmology, University of Cape Town, Cape Town, South Africa, E-mail: amirbedrikello@gmail.com.
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