

Roads and Malaria Transmission: Unveiling the Epidemiological Impacts of Transport Infrastructure on *Anopheles* Mosquito Ecology in Sub-Saharan Africa

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ABSTRACT

Transport networks such as roads and highways are essential for economic growth and connectivity, yet their unintended ecological consequences can exacerbate malaria transmission dynamics. This review explores the multifaceted role of road construction and maintenance in shaping *Anopheles* mosquito habitats. Poorly planned roads often create stagnant water pools in borrow pits and ditches, providing breeding grounds for malaria vectors. Increased human mobility along transport corridors further enhances parasite circulation across regions. The review synthesizes evidence on road-induced ecological modifications, epidemiological implications, and potential mitigation strategies. Emphasis is placed on integrating vector ecology into road engineering, improving drainage design, and fostering collaboration between health and infrastructure sectors. By highlighting best practices and knowledge gaps, this review underscores the need for eco-sensitive infrastructure development to curb malaria risks while sustaining socioeconomic benefits.

Keywords: Roads, transport corridors, *Anopheles* mosquitoes, malaria transmission, breeding habitats.

INTRODUCTION

Malaria continues to be one of the most persistent public health threats in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), responsible for over 90% of the world's malaria cases and deaths. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), nearly 250 million cases were reported globally in 2023, with SSA bearing the heaviest burden [1]. Despite decades of progress through interventions such as insecticide-treated nets (ITNs), indoor residual spraying (IRS), larval source management, and chemoprevention, malaria transmission remains entrenched in many rural and peri-urban communities [2]. The persistence of malaria is not merely due to biological resistance of vectors or parasites but also because of complex ecological, infrastructural, and socio-economic factors that sustain favorable conditions for transmission [3].

One of the often-overlooked contributors to malaria persistence in SSA is transport infrastructure, particularly road construction and maintenance. Roads are vital for socio-economic development, enabling trade, access to healthcare, education, and mobility. Governments and international development agencies heavily invest in road networks to stimulate growth and regional integration [4]. However, road development is a double-edged sword: while it improves connectivity, it also profoundly alters local ecologies, often with unintended public health consequences. Road construction reshapes landscapes, modifies natural drainage, and creates artificial depressions. Borrow pits, ditches, tire ruts, and poorly maintained culverts frequently accumulate stagnant water, forming ideal habitats for *Anopheles* mosquitoes, the primary vectors of malaria. Seasonal flooding, coupled with poor engineering designs that ignore ecological health, further exacerbates these breeding conditions [5]. In addition, roads increase human mobility, enabling parasite carriers to move across districts and even international borders, seeding infections in previously low-transmission areas. Thus, transport corridors become not only channels for commerce but also epidemiological conduits for malaria parasites [6].

Emerging evidence indicates that roads and associated ecological disruptions may shape unique malaria transmission dynamics in SSA. For instance, in areas where ITN coverage is high, malaria transmission hotspots are often clustered around poorly drained roadsides. Similarly, regions with expanding highway networks often record surges in malaria incidence despite ongoing control measures [7]. Understanding this link between infrastructure and malaria ecology is critical if public health goals such as malaria elimination and eventual eradication are to be realized in SSA.

Although malaria control programs in SSA have focused extensively on biomedical and vector control interventions, limited attention has been directed toward the unintended health consequences of infrastructure projects, particularly roads [6]. Road construction and maintenance are typically viewed through the lens of economic development, with ecological and health implications considered secondary or ignored altogether. This sectoral disconnect has allowed infrastructure projects to inadvertently undermine malaria control investments. For example, poorly drained borrow pits created during road construction may remain active mosquito breeding sites for decades if left untreated [8]. Routine road maintenance activities often fail to incorporate basic drainage considerations, perpetuating water stagnation along corridors. At the same time, increased population movement facilitated by new or rehabilitated roads promotes malaria importation and reintroduction into areas that had achieved local control. Collectively, these processes reinforce transmission cycles, erode progress in malaria reduction, and escalate healthcare costs [9]. The problem is further compounded by the lack of cross-sectoral collaboration. Engineers, urban planners, and construction contractors rarely consult entomologists, epidemiologists, or public health officials when designing or executing road projects [10]. As a result, vector ecology remains absent from road engineering manuals and guidelines. This siloed approach perpetuates a vicious cycle where development projects intended to improve quality of life inadvertently exacerbate disease risks.

The persistence of malaria in many Sub-Saharan African (SSA) countries can be attributed, at least in part, to the failure to integrate eco-sensitive design principles and vector management strategies into road infrastructure planning. Roads, while critical for economic growth and connectivity, often create unintended ecological disruptions such as stagnant water bodies, altered drainage systems, and fragmented landscapes that provide ideal breeding grounds for *Anopheles* mosquitoes. These structural changes, coupled with increased human mobility facilitated by road networks, intensify the circulation of malaria parasites across regions, thereby sustaining transmission. Unless deliberate efforts are made to bridge this knowledge and policy gap, roads will continue to act as silent yet potent drivers of malaria risk. This study, therefore, seeks to systematically examine the epidemiological consequences of transport infrastructure on malaria ecology in SSA, with specific objectives ranging from exploring the ecological modifications induced by road construction to analyzing case studies and identifying gaps in current policies and engineering practices. By doing so, the study highlights the urgent need for integrated strategies that align road development with malaria control objectives. Such strategies including improved drainage, ecological restoration, and intersectoral collaboration can mitigate risks while ensuring that infrastructure contributes to both socio-economic progress and public health resilience.

Roads and Landscape Ecology: Creating Vector Habitats

Roads and their surrounding landscapes significantly influence the ecology of disease vectors, particularly mosquitoes, by creating and sustaining artificial habitats. Hydrological alterations are a common consequence of poorly engineered or unmaintained roads. Structures such as roadside ditches, borrow pits, culverts, and compacted soils often disrupt natural drainage systems and retain water after rainfall [11]. These stagnant pools serve as ideal breeding grounds for mosquito larvae, with studies from rural Kenya, Tanzania, and Nigeria showing that such roadside puddles frequently harbor dense populations of *Anopheles gambiae* s.l., often more productive than natural breeding sites. In addition to altering hydrology, roads impact vegetation cover and microclimates. Road corridors expose soils, promote erosion, and encourage water pooling, while removal of canopy cover elevates ground temperatures, producing sunlit pools that are highly favorable for larval development [12]. Vegetation management practices, such as bush clearing along roads, further alter humidity levels and predator-prey interactions, potentially boosting mosquito survival. Moreover, construction activities leave behind borrow pits and excavation scars, which, if not rehabilitated, persist as long-term water-filled depressions. These artificial habitats frequently support year-round mosquito breeding, sustaining perennial malaria transmission even in regions that otherwise experience seasonal patterns. Thus, roads play an underappreciated role in shaping vector ecology and disease risks [13].

Roads, Human Mobility, and Parasite Dynamics

Road networks play a critical role in shaping human mobility and, consequently, the dynamics of malaria transmission. Transport corridors often act as pathways that link malaria-endemic zones to regions with lower transmission, facilitating the movement of parasites across wide geographic boundaries [14]. Truck drivers,

migrant workers, and travelers serve as vectors of human mobility, unintentionally carrying *Plasmodium* parasites into receptive areas where competent mosquito vectors thrive, a phenomenon sometimes referred to as the “corridor effect.” Beyond mobility, roads transform settlement and socioeconomic patterns by attracting new villages, markets, and agricultural activities along their routes [14, 15]. Such development increases opportunities for human–vector interaction, particularly in rural roadside communities that often lack adequate healthcare infrastructure. These conditions magnify local vulnerability to malaria outbreaks, especially in densely clustered populations near transport hubs where transmission intensity can escalate. Evidence from Sub-Saharan Africa underscores this dynamic: in Uganda, new highways have been associated with heightened malaria prevalence due to intensified mosquito breeding and human movement; in Nigeria, borrow pits created during road construction provided ideal mosquito breeding sites, correlating with increased malaria incidence; and in Ethiopia, road proximity itself has been identified as a risk factor for infection [16]. Collectively, these examples illustrate the complex interplay between infrastructure, mobility, ecology, and disease.

Epidemiological Impacts

Road networks exert profound epidemiological impacts on malaria transmission by simultaneously shaping mosquito ecology and human exposure patterns. One of the most visible consequences is the emergence of localized hotspots, as road construction and maintenance often create stagnant pools of water in borrow pits, ditches, and poorly drained areas, which serve as ideal breeding habitats for *Anopheles* mosquitoes [17]. This clustering of vector breeding sites along road infrastructure amplifies the density of infectious mosquitoes near human settlements and travel corridors. Moreover, the hydrological alterations brought about by culverts, roadside canals, and compacted surfaces extend the malaria transmission season by sustaining artificial water bodies long after natural rainfall patterns would have dried up potential habitats. Such changes lead to a shift in traditional transmission patterns, prolonging risk exposure for communities living or working near roads [18]. Importantly, the expansion of road networks frequently coincides with increased human activity such as settlement growth, agricultural expansion, and commerce, all of which intensify human–vector contact. Without proper planning, road-associated development projects may inadvertently undermine prior gains in malaria control, creating conditions conducive to disease resurgence. Thus, roads act as ecological and social catalysts, reinforcing the persistence and spread of malaria across affected regions [19].

Mitigation Strategies and Integrated Approaches

Mitigation strategies for addressing road-related health and environmental challenges in sub-Saharan Africa require integrated and eco-sensitive approaches. Eco-sensitive road engineering is central, involving the incorporation of effective drainage systems to prevent stagnant water accumulation, rehabilitation of borrow pits through backfilling or productive conversion such as aquaculture, and the use of culverts and raised roadbeds to ensure natural water flow is maintained [20]. Beyond engineering, health–infrastructure collaboration is vital; road projects should embed health impact assessments and foster cooperation between ministries of health and transport to monitor mosquito ecology during and after construction, thereby mitigating malaria risks. Equally important is community engagement, where local populations can play a role in larval source management along roadsides, supported by modern tools such as GIS mapping and drone surveillance [21]. Public awareness campaigns targeting roadside communities can further strengthen protective behaviors. Despite these strategies, research and policy gaps remain pressing. There is a lack of longitudinal data on malaria incidence pre- and post-road construction, a need for cost-benefit analyses to validate eco-sensitive road designs, and an urgent call to explore the complex interactions between climate change, road development, and malaria transmission in the region [22]. Collectively, these integrated measures offer a pathway toward sustainable infrastructure that safeguards both human and environmental health.

CONCLUSION

Roads are vital for connectivity and socioeconomic growth in Sub-Saharan Africa, yet they remain an overlooked driver of malaria transmission. By reshaping landscapes, altering drainage, and fostering stagnant water accumulation, road construction inadvertently creates ideal breeding habitats for *Anopheles* mosquitoes. At the same time, increased human mobility along transport corridors accelerates parasite dispersal and sustains transmission cycles. The cumulative effect is the emergence of new epidemiological hotspots that undermine malaria control investments and prolong disease persistence. Addressing these challenges requires eco-sensitive engineering, robust drainage designs, and proactive rehabilitation of borrow pits, integrated with sustained intersectoral collaboration between health and infrastructure stakeholders. Community engagement and innovative surveillance tools further enhance resilience. Ultimately, aligning road development with malaria control strategies offers a pathway to

sustainable infrastructure that not only advances economic growth but also safeguards public health. Without such integration, roads will continue to serve as silent conduits of malaria transmission.

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