

## Sophie's choice? Not quite

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### To the Editor:

Re "[Meant to Keep Malaria Out, Mosquito Nets Are Used to Haul Fish In](#)," by Jeffrey Gettleman (Front Page article, Jan. 25)

Mr. Gettleman points out a stark and tragic tradeoff that some households in Africa currently face: their families can suffer from hunger today; or they can feed their children today, but at the cost of putting their family at risk of dying from malaria and at the cost of reducing future food availability. That is a horrible situation to be in. There is no doubt about that. However, I found the article lacking in perspective, along three important dimensions.

First, Mr. Gettleman fails to point out that suffering from one evil is better than suffering from two. The households that today have to face the tragic tradeoff between hunger and malaria were only ten years ago suffering from *both* hunger and malaria. Thanks to the ramp up in bednet distribution in the last decade, there have been massive gains in malaria control. Among the African population at risk for malaria (estimated at [840 million in 2013](#)), the share sleeping under an insecticide-treated bednet (ITN) rose [from 2% in 2004 to 44% in 2013](#). This increase automatically implies that the great majority of the [400 million or so ITNs](#) (with a lifespan of around 3 years) distributed between 2010 and 2013 were put to their intended use. Indeed, detailed studies in [Madagascar](#), [Kenya](#) and [Uganda](#) found observed usage rates of about 60% within a few months and 90% six or twelve months after distribution.

There is simply no evidence on whether rates of appropriate use are lower among fishing communities. The [Tanganyika study](#) cited by Mr. Gettleman does not report the share of bednets that are used for fishing, only the share of households reporting fishing with a bednet. Without knowing how many bednets households have, we simply do not know the share of bednets misused.

Second, Mr. Gettleman's article fails to give us any sense of the share of the population that faces this new hunger/malaria tradeoff. According to the [latest estimates](#), fishing populations are less than 1% of the African population at risk for malaria. That implies that the population facing this trade-off must be less than this 1%, since not all fishing households are poor. What is more, an individual need not sleep under a bednet herself to benefit since malaria is a communicable disease. The results of a [study](#) on the community-wide effects of bednet coverage suggests that unprotected households face a much reduced malaria burden if enough households within 300m sleep under treated bednets.

Third, there is Mr. Gettleman's main concern, the fish. Mr. Gettleman and many of his interlocutors are concerned with the fact that bednets have caused a new problem: overfishing. But have they really? The only numbers mentioned by Mr. Gettleman are: "The extent of the damage is unclear, but recent surveys show that Madagascar's industrial shrimp catch plummeted to 3,143 tons in 2010 from 8,652 tons in 2002." Once more, Mr. Gettleman fails to provide perspective. Aquaculture shrimp production (which is obviously not affected by bednet fishing and seems to be the lion's share of shrimp fishing in Madagascar) has been falling [from 16,534 tons in 2006 to 10,886 tons in 2010](#). Thus, much more likely

than bednet fishing, the culprit for the drop in shrimp catch over that period was the falling world demand.

One also needs to ask: Weren't starving households using other makeshift gears – sacks or cloths – to illegally fish from the shore, prior to the introduction of bednets? Mr. Gettleman himself mentions reed baskets that can be made in two days. How much were these being used before bednets? The [Tanganyika study](#) again fails to be informative here.

Ultimately, there is simply no evidence on whether bednets are contributing to dwindling fish populations. In contrast, rigorous evidence shows that climate change is having [dramatic effects](#) on fish populations [in this region](#), something it would behoove Mr Gettelman to remember.

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