Time for the World Bank to act on malaria

April 25, Africa Malaria Day, provides time to reflect on a treatable and often preventable infection that still affects 500 million people worldwide and kills well over 1 million—mainly African children—yearly. Such shameful figures invite blame and recrimination, the backdrop for two Viewpoints published online today. Amir Attaran and colleagues suggest that the World Bank has reneged on funding and created a smokescreen of misleading figures. In reply, Jean-Louis Sarbib and colleagues state that “Paul Wolfowitz has put the full weight of his leadership behind the Bank’s renewed commitment to malaria, with a strong emphasis on results”.

Yet malaria was absent from Wolfowitz’s policy speech on April 11 in Jakarta. Instead, his address, entitled Good governance and development: a time for action, emphasised reducing corruption in recipient governments by increasing the Bank’s Department of Integrity staff from 53 to 65. In contrast, Attaran asserts that the number of malaria specialists at the Bank has dropped from 7 to 0. Central to Wolfowitz’s vision, as new Bank President, is the need for recipients to develop “transparent and accountable institutions, strong skills and competence, and a fundamental willingness to do the right thing”. Welcome sentiments, on which the Bank might also reflect.

However, the speech held out hope, not so much in its sabre-rattling as in its delivery, which revealed genuine cultural sensitivity and affection for the people of Indonesia, where Wolfowitz had served as Ambassador in his pre-Iraq days. That passion, combined with his reputation as an able manager, could be an asset for enabling health-care delivery in the absence of effective national systems, since in many of the world’s poorest areas, the Bank remains the major source of health finance. And it is precisely in these locations that the 2000 Meltzer report on the future of the World Bank recommended that effort should be concentrated.

Malaria accounts for 10% of Africa’s disease burden and US$12 billion yearly in lost productivity. The Abuja declaration of April 25, 2000, calls for halving malaria mortality in Africa by 2010. If the World Bank is serious about being judged on results, as Sarbib and colleagues propose, then the Abuja target provides an excellent opportunity for cost-effective action.