

# An Untapped West Africa

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Being the second largest and most populated continent in the world, Africa is truly an enormous market when it comes to conducting clinical trials. The pros and cons of the clinical trials market surprisingly evens out making it an even more desirable location for pharmaceuticals, medical device and biotechnology companies and other CROs.

South Africa is one country which has an established set up for conducting clinical trials. But it appears that the establishment has not been successful in progressing to other countries due to various factors.

There has been many diseases and infections reported both as isolated cases and as an epidemic in the past and in recent times. The one that shifted the focus of the world was the recent Ebola Outbreak. This deadly outbreak in West Africa also saw an outbreak in clinical trials in this region which proved once again that African regions are always in need of attention from pharmaceutical companies across the globe apart from NGOs and Government agencies.

## **The Region**

Consisting of approx. 15 countries, the West African region consists of major airports, harbours and roadways connecting to each of the countries which makes internal trade easier. However, these are used much less by the locals as most of the trade is within the grasp of very few. Like most, the West African regions also are driven by poverty, diseases, corruption, poor infrastructure and terrorism when compared to the rest of the world.

But the capitals of each of the countries are quite the opposite. There is good infrastructure for starting a business, a good pool of qualified people who can be turned into professionals with some training and mentoring, safety and security to a decent extent. Which is why it appears as though these regions are not being explored to the required extent by pharmaceutical companies.

## **The Disease Prevalence and Patient Population**

West African region is home to many epidemics related to food borne, water borne, air borne along with the sexually transmitted diseases. All these are usually attributed to the environment (tropical weather), hygiene practices and superstitious beliefs.

But on the other hand, there are several doctors and hospitals which are both government and private, NGOs and medical camps, which constantly treat patients or approach them for check-ups and suggest treatment.

In the past and also in recent times, diseases like Malaria, Dengue, Cholera, HIV and other STDs have been major causes of epidemics. With every outbreak or mass infections, the local government, international NGOs and government agencies have ensured that adequate basic drug supply (like anti- pyretic, anti-inflammatory etc.) are available for the affected population. Also, international organizations have in parallel ensured that medical practices are altered to accommodate the changes in treatment. But there has always been a lack of reported clinical trials from these regions for such diseases which also is a responsibility of the pharma industry.

With the extent of disease prevalence and an increased patient population, it appears that the advanced medicines and treatment options are not becoming available. Poverty and a general lack of income also has contributed to this. Due to various challenges and myths surrounding this region, pharma companies minimally approach grants from various source and take the opportunity to explore the market.

## **Why to do Clinical Trials in West Africa – Its Importance**

With a high prevalence of diseases in this region and the comparatively poor or lack of adequate treatment facilities and options, there is a necessity to do clinical trials in the West African region in order for the people to gain access to various treatment options. These clinical trials can be targeted for prophylaxis rather than treatment which will still increase the chances of survival for these people.

Pharmaceutical companies have their basic vision and mission as providing quality treatment solutions for diseases around the world. But when it comes to West African region, it appears to be neglected to an extent. Knowledge sharing and educating the patients and/or the population about clinical trials and its various benefits can help in boosting the market. This in turn will facilitate the patient pool and provide quality data during a clinical trial.

By entering the West African market, it gives pharma companies to start off on a clean slate and gives a chance to build the infrastructure to their specifications in a cost-effective manner. If it is a temporary set-up for the company, then once the clinical study is closed, the facilities can be provided to the community. This in turn helps and supports the growth of the community and basic health infrastructure.

Disease free is a myth for human kind But this should not stop pharma companies from exploring this region and providing the necessary options to benefit the society. The entire world fights for diseases like cancer and diabetes and the pharma industry is the prime solution. Where countries like India have successfully fought against Polio, West African countries also deserve this kind of freedom and pharma companies should analyse and approach this region for better life of these people. After all, they are part of the same world.

### **Challenges in Conducting Clinical Trials in West Africa**

In spite of rolling out the needs, importance and benefits of conducting clinical trials in the West African region, pharma companies have to overcome an array of challenges to reach out to the patients.

The prime culprit is the tropical climate which provides a perfect condition for diseases to thrive. This has led to the implementation of various precautionary measures and conditions for travel, stay and living in these regions. The risk of contracting an infectious disease puts off people or employees from travelling to West Africa.

Infrastructure and resources in a naïve region is also challenging and it often calls for including staff from other countries which can become challenging due to the risks involved.

Various culture and beliefs of the population and the hierarchy system practiced in every community makes it difficult to step in to approach officials and professional contacts. This also affects international trading practices making it difficult to import drugs and exporting of trial related samples.

Finally, are the risks of terrorism and corruption which tops all of these as security and safety becomes the prime importance when there are plans for long term presence for clinical trials. During crisis, the lack of basic needs and treatment facilities including first aid increases the risk even further.

### **How to overcome these challenges?**

West Africa is usually unexplored by big or small pharma companies and hence knowing the country and its people is very important to run a business.

Feasibility studies from the local regions will help in understanding the culture, society, behaviours etc. along with the technical aspects of infrastructure and resource. A good homework prior to start of processes in these regions will help in a smooth run of the trials.

It is encouraged to obey the culture and hierarchy system of the people in order to approach the right person for the right advice or to get a work done. Knowing the local people will help implementing processes easier. The easier way to accomplish this is by contacting various NGOs and Non-profit Organizations who have their presence in this region. They not only are able to assist in bridging the gap between companies and local population, but they also can provide an insight into the cultural aspects and to an extent help with providing infrastructure and safety.

Self-discipline, tolerance and taking the recommended precautionary measures for this region will ensure that there is a higher percentage of safety.

## **Conclusion**

With the recent outbreak of Ebola, West African regions have proved the need of attention and for clinical trials in various therapeutic areas. Though the education and awareness of the importance and benefits should still be boosted, this time is well worth investing in these regions.

The recent boost in clinical trials for Ebola has led to the emergence of many technically sound local resources who can be utilized for any clinical trial with minimal training. It has also led to an increase in medical facilities and infrastructure, which can be useful for any pharma company at this time.

West Africa has the potential to develop as a good market for clinical trials. All we need is few like-minded companies to come together and help in utilising this opportunity.

The logo for ASSAY features a stylized graphic above the word "ASSAY". The graphic consists of two yellow curved lines that meet at a point at the top, with a blue curved line below them. The word "ASSAY" is written in a bold, blue, sans-serif font.

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