Eight-year Retrospective Analysis of Malaria Trends in Gedeo Zone, South Ethiopia (2012-2019)

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Abstract

Background: Informed decision making is underlined by all level of the tiers in the health system. Poor data record system coupled with under- (over)-reporting of malaria cases affects the country's elimination activities. Thus, malaria data at health facilities and health offices are important particularly to monitor and evaluate malaria elimination progresses. This study was intended to assess overall reported malaria cases, spatiotemporal trends and factors associated in Gedeo zone, South Ethiopia, and compare malaria case reports by the health centers and health offices.

Methods: Past eight years retrospective data stored in 17 health centers and 5 district health offices in Gedeo Zone were extracted. Malaria cases data at each health center with sociodemographic information, between 2012 and 2019, were included. Meteorological data were obtained from the national meteorology agency. The data were analyzed using Stata 13.

Results: A total of 485,414 clinical suspects were examined for malaria during the previous 8 years at health centers. Of these suspects, 57,228 (11.79%) were confirmed malaria cases. We noted, an overall under reporting of malaria, 3,758 clinical suspects and 467 confirmed malaria cases were not captured at the health offices level. Based on the health centers records, *Plasmodium falciparum* (49.74%) was slightly higher ($p = 0.795$) than *P. vivax* (47.59%). The majority of cases were found in adults (≥ 15 years of age) that accounted for 11.47% of confirmed malaria cases ($p < 0.0001$). There was high spatiotemporal variation: highest cases record was during autumn (12.55%) ($p < 0.0001$) and, the highest (18,150, 13.17%) and lowest (5,187 (10.44%)) malaria cases were reported from Dilla town and Yirgacheffe rural district, respectively ($p = 0.0002$). Monthly rainfall and minimum temperature exhibited strong positive associations with the number of confirmed malaria cases.

Conclusion: A notable decline in malaria cases was observed over the eight-year period. Both *P. falciparum* and *P. vivax* co-exist; hence, control measures should continue targeting both species. The high malaria burden in urban (Dilla town) and suburban (Dilla zuria district) settings and autumn season need spatiotemporal consideration by the elimination program.

Background

In Ethiopia, *Plasmodium falciparum* (*P. falciparum*) and *P. vivax* are the predominant causative species of malaria. The two coexist in almost all malarious areas at different levels of co-endemicity. Overall, large proportion of infections reported is due to *P. falciparum* (~ 60%) followed by *P. vivax* (~ 40%) [1, 2] with micro-epidemiological and seasonal variation. Such co-endemicity makes malaria control and elimination more complicated in Ethiopia than in most other areas where the later species is very low [2, 3].

Malaria transmission in Ethiopia is seasonal associated with precipitation and temperature changes; peaking from September to November following the large rainy season [4]. However, construction of

dams and irrigation-based agricultural activities sometimes modify malaria seasonal trend in Ethiopia [5, 6].

The past decades witnessed a sharp decline in morbidity and mortality, putting Ethiopia among the few African countries on track to meet the global 2020 milestone of cutting incidence by 40% or more [7]. These successes, encouraged the Ethiopian national malaria control program (NMCP) to stratify the country's malaria transmission into four based on annual parasite incidence (API); malaria free (API ~ 0 cases/1,000 population/year), low (API > 0 and < 5), moderate (API ≥ 5 and < 100) and high (API ≥ 100) [4], as a preparation to embark on nationwide malaria elimination. The policy and strategy shift to elimination requires data-driven decision making to tailor interventions [8, 9]. Thus, policy makers should be provided timely with quality and relevant data to inform national programs.

In Ethiopia, malaria data is captured through the health management information system (HMIS) at different tiers of the healthcare delivery systems. The hierarchy of data flow is from Health Posts (at *kebele* level) and Health Centers (HCs) to district health offices (HOs) which in turn channels to Zonal Health Departments, then to Regional Health Bureaus and finally to the Federal Ministry of Health [10]. Therefore, health post and HC data that are organized and archived at respective district HOs are the ones that are analyzed to evaluate the spatial and temporal changes, local malaria dynamics and *Plasmodia* species distribution.

Although understanding malaria trend could help to recognize the progress of elimination activities, under- (over)-reporting of malaria cases could affect the country's elimination efforts. Yet, validation studies comparing data from the different tiers of the health care delivery system hardly exist in most settings and at micro-epidemiological level. Although the six malarious districts of Gedeo Zone are stratified as elimination targeted low transmission districts by NMCP [4], little information is available to understand the overall trend of malaria and the above issues in the area. Thus, we assessed the species composition, malaria data quality, spatiotemporal trend and associated socio-demographic and climatic variables. Further, the accuracy of HO malaria records (HMIS data) was checked against the HC data (source document).

Methods

Study setting

Gedeo zone (Fig. 1) is 360 kilometers from Addis Ababa, it is one of the 14 zones in the Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples' Region. It is located 5°53'N to 6°27'N latitude, and 38°8' to 38°30' east longitude. The altitude of the zone ranges from 1,268 to 2,993 meters above sea level. The mean annual temperature is between 12.6°C and 30°C and the mean annual rainfall ranges from 1,001–1,800 mm.

Based on the Gedeo Zone health department report, 36.31% (423,411/1,166,163) of the population is at risk of malaria. Malaria transmission in the zone is seasonal with peak from September to November. The API of the zone in 2019 was close to 2.0. The zone is sub-divide into six districts and two town

administrations [11]. Districts, also known as “*woredas*” in Ethiopia, are the third level administrative divisions of the country, following regional states and zones and are further sub-divided into “*kebeles*” (the smallest administrative unit with its own jurisdiction). Six elimination-targeted settings, low transmission, by the NMCP; Dilla and Yirgacheffe towns, and Dilla zuria, Wonago, Kochore and Yirgacheffe rural districts were included [4].

Data collection

Eight-year (from 2012 to 2019) data were collected from malaria laboratory registration logbooks in the HCs and HMIS of the district HOs. Six district HOs and seventeen public HCs with at least 8 years of service which report them were covered. HC records with missing information of cases; address (*kebele*/district), dates of HC visit, age, sex or results of malaria diagnosis were excluded from the main part analysis. These excluded data were again analyzed separately to address the data quality issues at HCs. Data on malaria diagnosis results (negative, or positive, and infecting *Plasmodium* species for positives), time of diagnoses (date/month/year) and socio-demographic data (*kebele*/district, age and sex) were collected. In addition, meteorological data; station level monthly and annual precipitation, maximum and minimum temperatures and relative humidity was obtained from the national meteorology agency of Ethiopia. Data collectors attended adequate training to assure quality. Further, the consistency and completeness of the extracted data was checked for each HC and district.

Data analysis

Microsoft office excel worksheet 2019 and the Stata data software 13 (College Station, Texas 77845 USA) were used for data entry and analysis. Descriptive statistics was used to show the distribution of malaria cases with respect to months, years, sex, age, *Plasmodia* species and district. Pearson’s chi-square (χ^2) test was used to determine the association of the different variables with confirmed malaria cases. Logistic regression was also performed to assess the association of malaria cases with socio-demographic variables, seasons and districts. Odds ratio (OR) with the corresponding 95% confidence interval (CI) was used to assess the differences in malaria prevalence with selected predictors. Spearman correlations were used to measure the strength of association of monthly malaria cases with meteorological variables. P-value of less than 0.05 was taken as statistically significant.

Results

Year-based data with missing variables at HCs

In respective order 1852 (0.38%) and 249 (0.43%) of clinical suspects and confirmed malaria cases were excluded from the downstream analysis due to incompleteness. Overall, there was a significant reduction in missing data between 2012 and 2019 ($p = 0.001$). During the first two years there were more numbers of both suspected and confirmed cases of missing variables. Specifically, the highest data with missing variables (413 clinically suspected and 76 confirmed cases) occurred in 2012. Whereas, the lowest records of missing variables with 107 clinically suspected and 10 confirmed cases were reported in 2019 and 2018 respectively. Generally, the number of clinical suspects with missing variable declined from 413

in 2012 to 107 in 2019 by approximately 4-fold and confirmed cases from 76 in 2012 to 11 by 7-fold in 2019 (Table 1).

Table 1
Number of missing data on clinical suspects (N) and confirmed malaria cases (n) by year, Gedeo zone, South Ethiopia, 2012–2019

Year	Grand total clinical suspects (N)	Excluded clinical suspects n (%)	Grand total confirmed cases (N)	Excluded confirmed cases n (%)	P-value
2012	80601	413 (0.51)	11683	76 (0.65)	0.001
2013	89979	320 (0.36)	16075	38 (0.24)	
2014	37076	224 (0.60)	4450	40 (0.90)	
2015	58788	311 (0.53)	5042	24 (0.48)	
2016	74693	182 (0.24)	10384	19 (0.18)	
2017	61395	186 (0.30)	4419	31 (0.70)	
2018	38006	109 (0.29)	2557	10 (0.39)	
2019	46728	107 (0.23)	2867	11 (0.38)	
Total	487266	1852 (0.38)	57477	249 (0.43)	
<i>N, n: number of cases; %: percentage (n/N*100); Grand total: quantitatively analyzed + excluded data (missing data that analyzed separately)</i>					

Annual clinical suspects and confirmed malaria cases based on HC versus HO records

There is an evidence of statistically significant inconsistency ($p = 0.041$) in both clinical and confirmed malaria case reports between HCs and HOs, overall, the 8-years period (2012–2019). Higher clinical suspects (485,414) were recorded at HCs compared to the HOs (481,656). Similarly, the corresponding confirmed malaria cases were 57,228 (11.79%) at the HCs and 56,761 (11.78%) at HOs although establishing which one is more accurate is rather not easy. With this, the number of clinical suspects recorded by the HCs was higher by 3758. The data kept by the HOs was lower on average by about 470 each year (except 2012, 2018). This difference was pronounced in 2016. During 2012 and 2018 the numbers of clinical suspects recorded at HCs were consistent with HO data. In addition, the HMIS captured on average 58 less confirmed malaria cases each year except in 2012 and 2018. In 2012 and 2018 the numbers of confirmed cases were higher at HO records than at HC records (Table 2).

Table 2
Numbers of clinical suspects (N) and confirmed malaria cases (n) by year; HCs and HOs data, Gedeo zone, South Ethiopia, 2012–2019

Year	Data from HCs					Data from HOs			P-value
	Clinical suspects (N)	Confirmed			P-value	Clinical suspects (N)	Confirmed		
		Pf n (%)	Pv n (%)	Pf/Pv mixed n (%)			Pf n (%)	Pv n (%)	
2012	80188	5921 (51.01)	5403 (46.55)	283 (2.44)	0.795	80188	5785 (48.40)	6168 (51.60)	0.041
2013	89659	7386 (46.06)	8168 (50.93)	483 (3.01)		89298	7876 (49.48)	8041 (50.52)	
2014	36765	2110 (47.85)	2199 (49.86)	101 (2.29)		36649	2277 (52.13)	2091 (47.87)	
2015	58564	2642 (52.65)	2232 (44.48)	144 (2.87)		58455	2289 (46.52)	2631 (53.48)	
2016	74511	5660 (54.61)	4450 (42.93)	255 (2.46)		71502	4937 (49.55)	5027 (50.45)	
2017	61209	2014 (45.90)	2242 (51.09)	132 (3.01)		61049	1928 (45.18)	2339 (54.82)	
2018	37897	1298 (50.98)	1182 (46.43)	66 (2.59)		37897	1313 (51.47)	1238 (48.53)	
2019	46621	1437 (50.30)	1359 (47.57)	61 (2.13)		46618	1442 (51.12)	1379 (48.88)	
Total	485,414	28,468 (49.74)	27,235 (47.59)	1,525 (2.67)		481,656	27,847 (49.06)	28,914 (50.94)	
N, n: number of cases; %: percentage (n/N*100), Pf: Plasmodium falciparum; Pv: Plasmodium vivax									

Overall, a notable decline in malaria, HCs (source data), was observed during the eight-year period, except in 2016 and between 2018 and 2019. The number of confirmed malaria cases declined from 11607 in 2012 to 2857 in 2019, an 8.34% reduction from the baseline. Maximum and minimum numbers of confirmed cases were documented during 2013 and 2018 respectively. The case burden due to *P. falciparum* (49.74%) was comparable to *P. vivax* (47.59%) ($p = 0.795$). Yet, *P. vivax* overtook *P. falciparum* in cases burden ($p = 0.588$) during 2013, 2014 and 2017. Mixed species infections, *P. vivax* and *P. falciparum*, accounted a low proportion (2.67%) (Table 2).

Diagnostic performance; data from HCs

Regarding the diagnostic performance, the yearly trend of clinical suspects was directly proportional to the confirmed cases in each year. But the proportions of examined clinical suspects against confirmed

cases were increased from 6.91 in 2012 to 16.32 in 2019. The highest proportion (16.32) was recorded in 2019, whilst the lowest (5.59) was during 2013. This shows the proportion of 'non-malarial' febrile cases were increasing from 2012 to 2019 except in 2016 (Table 3).

Table 3
Proportion of clinical suspects against confirmed malaria cases,
Gedeo zone, South Ethiopia, 2012–2019

Year	Clinical suspects (N)	Confirmed (n)	Proportion (N/n)
2012	80188	11607	6.91
2013	89659	16037	5.59
2014	36765	4410	8.34
2015	58564	5018	11.67
2016	74511	10365	7.19
2017	61209	4388	13.95
2018	37897	2546	14.88
2019	46621	2857	16.32
Total	485,414	57,228	8.48

Malaria cases number by sex and age; data from HCs

Slightly more males (29,480 (11.34%)) were malaria positive ($p = 0.236$) than females (27,748 (12.30%)) (Fig. 2). The above 15 years age group was the most affected (30,406, 11.47%) than the other age groups, followed by under 5 children which accounted for 15116 (13.83%) of the cases. The above 15 years age group was twice more likely (OR = 2.00, 95% CI: 1.90, 2.11, $p < 0.0001$) to have malaria compared to the under 5 (Table 4).

Table 4

Logistic regression analysis of factors associated with malaria at HCs in Gedeo zone, South Ethiopia, 2012–2019

Variable	Clinical suspects N (%)	Confirmed n (%)	OR (95% CI)	P-value
Sex				
Male	259906 (53.54)	29480 (11.34)	1.0	
Female	225508 (46.46)	27748 (12.30)	1.02 (0.97, 1.08)	0.236
Age category				
<5	109302 (22.52)	15116 (13.83)	1.0	
5–14	111028 (22.87)	11706 (10.54)	1.33 (1.29, 1.37)	< 0.0001
15+	265084 (54.61)	30406 (11.47)	2.00 (1.90, 2.11)	< 0.0001
Season				
Winter	97227 (20.03)	11010 (11.32)	1.0	
Autumn	134054 (27.62)	16820 (12.55)	1.53 (1.37, 1.70)	< 0.0001
Summer	123200 (25.38)	13618 (11.05)	1.24 (1.19, 1.29)	< 0.0001
Spring	130933 (26.97)	15780 (12.05)	1.42 (1.34, 1.51)	< 0.0001
District/urban center				
Yirgacheffe rural	49684	5187 (10.44)	1	
Dilla town	137860	18150 (13.17)	3.16 (2.11, 4.22)	0.0002
Dilla zuria	119207	12588 (10.56)	2.30 (1.82, 2.78)	< 0.0001
Wonago	71689	7427 (10.36)	1.40 (1.21, 1.60)	< 0.0001
Yirgacheffe town	60531	6271 (10.36)	0.24 (0.07, 1.42)	0.780
Kochore	46443	7605 (16.37)	1.59 (1.20, 1.98)	< 0.0001
*: percentage (n/N*100)				

Spatiotemporal distribution of malaria cases

The peak confirmed case load (12.55%) was during autumn followed by spring (12.05%), summer (11.05%) and winter (11.32%) (Fig. 3). In autumn the likelihood of having malaria is 1.53 times more than winter (OR = 1.53, 95% CI: 1.37, 1.70, $p < 0.0001$) (Table 4). Similarly, the highest proportions of both *P. falciparum* (8445 (50.21%)) and *P. vivax* (7911 (47.03%)) were noted during autumn particularly in April. On the other hand, in winter the proportion of infection due to the two species, *P. falciparum* (5451 (49.51%)) and *P. vivax* (5312 (48.25%)) was relatively lowest (Fig. 3). Although *P. falciparum* was higher

than *P. vivax* in all seasons, the difference was the smallest (1.26%) during winter, while in autumn it is 3.17%. The number of mixed infections also had same pattern throughout the four seasons.

Overall, based on the HC records, the highest malaria case burden reported was from Dilla town (18,150 (13.17%)) from a total of 137,860 clinical suspects followed by the adjacent district, Dilla zuria (12,588 (10.56%)) from 119,207 tested suspects. The lowest was from Yirgacheffe rural district (5,187 (10.44%)). Dilla town annual malaria cases remained the highest throughout the 8-year period except in 2013 and 2019 (OR = 3.16, 95% CI: 2.11, 4.22, $p = 0.0002$) (Table 4). The highest confirmed cases during these two years were reported by Kochore (4390 (19.78%)) and Dilla zuria districts (1178 (8.04%)) from 22197 and 14648 clinical suspects respectively. Although there was an overall declining trend of confirmed malaria cases from 2012 to 2019, there were peaks in Kochore during 2013, Dilla town and Dilla zuria in 2016.

Yirgacheffe rural district had the highest variation (376 (80.51%)) in terms of confirmed malaria records between HC and HO data (HC-HO) followed by Dilla town (164 (35.12%)) and Dilla zuria district (-138 (29.55%)), data obtained by HC-HO. Whereas, Wonago district had the lowest (-6 (1.28%)) deviation of malaria data recording between HC and HO (Fig. 4).

The monthly total confirmed malaria cases showed a strong and positive association with monthly rainfall (Spearman's $\rho = 0.895$, $p < 0.0001$) and monthly minimum temperature (Spearman's $\rho = 0.671$, $p = 0.017$). Nevertheless, the maximum monthly temperature was negatively and weakly associated with the monthly confirmed malaria cases. Relative humidity seems not to have an effect on malaria transmission in the study area (Fig. 5).

Discussion

In the present study there was a significant reduction in data incompleteness; with missing variables between 2012 and 2019. Specifically, the number of clinical suspects with missing data variables declined between 2012 and 2019 by approximately 4-fold and confirmed cases with about 7-fold. Decreasing trend in data incompleteness overtime, is plausible indication of huge improvement in data quality which thereby an implication for improving programmatic performance over the years.

There was an overall notable difference in both total number of clinical suspects (3758) and confirmed malaria cases (467) recorded at HCs (source data) and HOs (HMIS data). For the 8-years period, discrepancies in clinically suspected and confirmed cases were observed between the HOs compared to the HCs. During 2012 and 2018 the numbers of clinical suspects recorded at HCs were consistent with HO data. In these years the numbers of confirmed cases were higher at HO records than HC records. Yirgacheffe rural district had the highest deviation in terms of confirmed malaria records between HC and HO data followed by Dilla town and Dilla zuria district, whereas Wonago district was the least. Similar to our finding, a three-month facility-based study comprising of various settings conducted in southern Ethiopia showed that majority of facilities under-reported total malaria (both confirmed and clinical malaria) cases [10]. This deviation in malaria data between the two systems, HC and HO, could be due to errors during entering the data from the sources (HCs) into recording formats of HMIS, lack of cross-

checking and proofing habits, training gaps on HMIS data use and unintentional/intentional false reports. In addition, limited computer access and skill, inadequate technical support [12], poor data management skills and limited functionality of electronic data management systems [13] might be the likely reasons for HMIS implementation challenges.

Concerning the diagnostic performance, the proportions of clinically suspected cases against confirmed cases were increased from 6.91 in 2012 to 16.32 in 2019. The highest proportion was recorded in 2019, whilst the lowest was during 2013. This revealed that the 'non-malarial' febrile cases were increasing from 2012 to 2019, which can be an indication of declining lab capacity of detecting malaria parasites. This declining lab capacity of detecting malaria might be due to the fact that the increased false negative reports associated with reduced sensitivity of microscopy with decreasing parasite densities [14], unable to detect sequestered *P. falciparum* parasites [15] and low competency of microscopists [16]. In the other way, such increased number of non-malarial febrile illnesses might be related to other febrile cases including yellow fever virus [17, 18] and typhoid fever [19] infections, as per the studies conducted in southern Ethiopia. In addition, this high number of non-malarial febrile illness might be due to fevers among positive individuals with malaria where the fever is coexisted with but not caused by the *Plasmodia* infection [20]. If laboratory performance percent confirmed declines it means; laboratory performance was decreasing over the years or something causing febrile illness in the area is increasing. Misdiagnosis and incorrect treatment of such non-malarial febrile illnesses with antimalarial drugs is possibly to contribute to rapid emergence of antimalarial drug resistance [21, 22] in the study area.

There was an overall reduction of malaria case from 2012 to 2019. According to data from HCs (source data), a maximum of 16,037 and a minimum of 2,546 of cases were observed during 2013 and 2018, respectively with 8.34 percent reduction. 2013 and 2016 were the exceptions to the declining trend as there were small epidemics in these periods in some parts of the Zone. Over the eight years period, overall, there was malaria positivity rate of 11.79%, data from the HCs. This positivity rate was comparable with certain studies done in Ethiopia including from Batu town (12.43%) [23], Arsi Negelle (11.40%) [24] and Halaba special district (9.47%) [25]. In contrast, higher overall malaria positivity rates were reported from related studies conducted in south-central Ethiopia [26], southern Ethiopia [27] and abroad in Dakar, Senegal [28] with 33.83%, 21.79% and 19.68% respectively. On the other hand, the present figure was higher than records in other local studies [29, 30]. These differences might be due to the variation in quality of laboratory diagnoses, difference in intervention measures, micro-climatic/altitudinal differences, and presence of constructions responsible for occurrence of temporary and permanent dams and drug and insecticide resistances. The possible contributing factors for the peaks/epidemics of malaria cases in 2013 and 2016 could be associated with feeble intervention activities in certain areas of the Zone.

P. falciparum and *P. vivax* were detected where equivalent; congruent results were reported in some other parts of Ethiopia [26, 27]. While other local studies [23, 25, 31] documented that the dominant species was *P. vivax*. The proportion of mixed infection in this study was congruent with other studies [26, 30], whereas inconsistent with other reports [27, 31]. The likely reason for the slightly higher proportion of *P.*

falciparum over *P. vivax* could be related to temperature; that is temperatures more than 18 °C for *P. falciparum* and more than 15 °C for *P. vivax* is suitable for the growth of these two species in human host and mosquito vectors [32, 33]. Apparently, in the current study area the average mean temperature during the eight years period found to be above 18 °C. The higher proportion of *P. vivax* against the national figures could also be an implication for the ability of repeated relapse cases and early emergence of gametocytes during blood-stage infection. In addition, there could be heterogeneity of the Duffy phenotype and the high number of vulnerable Duffy-positive individuals that associated with population movement [34] in the study area. Environmental fluctuations that change target mosquito species abundance might have an impact on *Plasmodia* species occurrence [35]. The issue demands additional study. The possible reason for scarcity of mixed infections in this co-endemic area might be a competitive or an antagonistic effect of one *Plasmodium* species over the other within the human host during co-infection [26, 35].

Males were slightly more infected (51.51%) by malaria than females (48.49%) over the eight-year period. This was paralleled with other studies conducted in different parts of Ethiopia [23, 26, 27, 31]. However, this finding was not consistent with other reports in southern Ethiopia [25] and elsewhere in Mozambique [36] where higher malaria cases in females were documented. Individuals in the age group of 15 and above were also more significantly affected. This was in line with other local studies [23, 31]. Inconsistent result was observed in southern Ethiopia [24] arguing that malaria cases cluster among the under-5. And a finding in Metema, northwest Ethiopia by Ferede et al. [37] showed that 5–14 years old were more infected. Possible justifications for the higher occurrence of malaria among males and older age group could be their engagement in various outdoor activities and staying outdoors during the nights [38]. Apart from outdoor exposures, differences in treatment-seeking behavior, access to health facilities and travel history [39] might be the possible contributors for the sex- and age-based variations of malaria cases. In addition, a review report revealed that adult females are better protected from parasitic diseases than males due to genetic and biological (hormonal) factors [40].

The peak number of confirmed malaria cases was recorded during autumn followed by spring, summer and winter with a statistically significant variation. This seasonal peak in malaria cases in autumn deviates from various studies in Ethiopia which is during spring after the main rain season [24, 26, 27, 31]. In addition, nationally the main malaria transmission season is from September to December following the peak rain season [1, 4]. This trade-off in seasonal peak of malaria cases might be as a result of varying climatological conditions (rainfall pattern and temperature changes) in the area against other settings. Despite the high prevalence of malaria cases during the three seasons, there were a substantial number of confirmed malaria cases in the dry (winter) season in this study. These, absence of significant variation in the proportion of the *P. vivax* and *P. falciparum* burden and almost, year-round presence of malaria might suggest the presence of suitable local environments for mosquitoes. The comparable proportion of *P. vivax* against *P. falciparum* in winter might be explained by the fact that *P. vivax* has ability to relapse rather than new infections. Since such traits could affect the temporal patterns of *P. vivax* infections.

Overall, high number of clinical suspects and confirmed malaria cases were documented in Dilla town (urban) and Dilla zuria district (sub-urban) as compared to other districts. Except in 2013 and 2019, Dilla town annual malaria cases remained the highest all over the 8-year period. The highest confirmed cases during these two years were overtaken by Kochore in 2013 and Dilla zuria districts in 2019. While the lowest was from Yirgacheffe rural district. In general, though an overall declining trend of confirmed malaria cases from 2012 to 2019, peaks were recorded in Kochore during 2013 and Dilla town in 2016. Although there is expectation of a better documentation, treatment-seeking behavior, access to health facilities, community knowledge and coverage of intervention activities in urban settings, the current data pointed to the contrary. Thus, in this study, high burden of urban and suburban malaria was noted. This could be because of massive construction activities (like road, house and small dams) and presence of coffee processing sites in Dilla town and its vicinity that could create suitable habitat for mosquito breeding. Travel history [39], differences in the competence and skills of the laboratory personnel and relatively good reporting system might also be the main responsible factors influencing the prevalence of malaria in Dilla town compared to rural districts. There have been healthy ongoing malaria control activities incorporating environmental management, indoor residual spraying (IRS), long-lasting insecticide-treated nets (LLINs) and artemisinin-based combination therapy in the area. These intervention activities could be attributed for the decreasing trends of malaria in other sites of the Zone. In addition, micro-environmental variations, micro-climatic situations [35] and changes in intervention (like IRS and LLINs) periods might have effect for these spatial differences of malaria cases.

Monthly rainfall and minimum temperature demonstrated statistically significant positive correlation with malaria cases. Previous studies in Ethiopia [41, 42] and elsewhere [43, 44] documented similar findings. However, the result of the current study on the association of rainfall and malaria cases was deviating from previous findings, stating higher rainfall does not necessarily influence the malaria changes [45, 46]. In contrast to our finding, minimum temperature was weakly correlated with malaria cases in southeast Ethiopia [42]. Ideally, rainfall and minimum temperature play a vital role in breeding and survival of malaria vectors and the respective parasites. Moreover, average monthly maximum temperature and relative humidity were weakly correlated with malaria cases. In disagreement to our finding, studies conducted in Jimma, Ethiopia by Alemu and others [41] and Sena and colleagues [42] in Gilgel-Gibe, southwest Ethiopia reported that inter-monthly relative humidity was significantly associated with monthly malaria cases.

The limitation of this study was incompleteness of patient data in the register with missed variables and only 8-year data were available during the data collection time at the HCs. Missing of asymptomatic cases and poor competence of the laboratory personnel at HCs could be the other limitations. Furthermore, clinically treated patients' (without laboratory confirmation) data and malaria mortality data were not recorded in the laboratory registration logbooks. Hence, interpretation of the finding should be with caution.

Conclusion

Over the entire period, 2012 to 2019, the program data quality improved over the years; underreporting and proportion of data incompleteness declined significantly, and the burden dropped continuously except in 2016. Yet, equivalent *P. falciparum* and *P. vivax* malaria existed, thus intervention actions should target both species. The high malaria prevalence in urban setting (Dilla town) and its vicinity and in autumn season necessitates spatiotemporal consideration by the control campaign. The intervention strategies need also consider older age groups. In general, malaria still remains a public health problem in the area, which demands strengthening of interventions and short-term forecasting based on local meteorological factors to achieve elimination goals in the area. In addition, the data recorded at the HCs and district HOs should be monitored for consistency.

Abbreviations

Pf

Plasmodium falciparum; *Pv*: *Plasmodium vivax*, NMCP: national malaria control program; API: annual parasite incidence; HMIS: health management information system; HC: health center; HO: health office; OR: odds ratio; CI: confidence interval; IRS: indoor residual spraying; LLINs: long-lasting insecticide-treated nets

Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate

Ethical approval was obtained from Department of Microbial, Cellular and Molecular Biology and College of Natural and Computational Sciences Ethical Review Committee, Addis Ababa University (CNSDO/318/11/2019).

Consent for publication

Not applicable.

Availability of data and materials

All data generated or analyzed during this study are included in this manuscript.

Competing interest statement

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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Authors' contributions

EM designed the study, involved in data collection, analyzed and interpreted the data, and drafted the manuscript. SWB contributed in data analysis works. FGT initiated the idea, involved in the data entry template development and gave feedback on the data collection protocol. SD was responsible for revising the draft manuscript. EG initiated the idea, guided the process of data collection and substantively revised the manuscript. HM participated in guidance of the data collection progresses and critically commented the whole section of the paper. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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Figures

Figure 1

Map of the study districts; Gedeo Zone Southern Nationals Nationalities and Peoples Regional state, Ethiopia

Figure 2

Annual clinical and confirmed malaria trend by sex and age in Gedeo zone, South Ethiopia from 2012-2019

Figure 3

Seasonal trend of clinical and confirmed malaria cases based on HC data, Gedeo zone, South Ethiopia, 2012-2019

Figure 4

Spatial distribution of confirmed malaria cases in HCs and HOs, Gedeo zone, South Ethiopia, 2012-2019

Figure 5

Monthly HC-level confirmed malaria cases and meteorological data in Gedeo zone, South Ethiopia from 2012-2019