COALITION FOR INNOVATION

HealthTech
Blueprint for the Future

Coalition for Innovation, supported by LG NOVA

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The views and opinions expressed in the chapters and case studies that follow are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views or positions of any entities they represent.

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October 2025

Preamble

The Coalition for Innovation is an initiative hosted by LG NOVA that creates the opportunity for innovators, entrepreneurs, and business leaders across sectors to come together to collaborate on important topics in technology to drive impact. The end goal: together we can leverage our collective knowledge to advance important work that drives positive impact in our communities and the world. The simple vision is that we can be stronger together and increase our individual and collective impact on the world through collaboration.

This "Blueprint for the Future" document (henceforth: "Blueprint") defines a vision for the future through which technology innovation can improve the lives of people, their communities, and the planet. The goal is to lay out a vision and potentially provide the framework to start taking action in the areas of interest for the members of the Coalition. The chapters in this Blueprint are intended to be a "Big Tent" in which many diverse perspectives and interests and different approaches to impact can come together. Hence, the structure of the Blueprint is intended to be as inclusive as possible in which different chapters of the Blueprint focus on different topic areas, written by different authors with individual perspectives that may be less widely supported by the group.

Participation in the Coalition at large and authorship of the overall Blueprint document does not imply endorsement of the ideas of any specific chapter but rather acknowledges a contribution to the discussion and general engagement in the Coalition process that led to the publication of this Blueprint.

All contributors will be listed as "Authors" of the Blueprint in alphabetical order. The Co-Chairs for each Coalition will be listed as "Editors" also in alphabetical order. Authorship will include each individual author's name along with optional title and optional organization at the author's discretion. Each chapter will list only the subset of participants that meaningfully contributed to that chapter. Authorship for chapters will be in rank order based on contribution: the first author(s) will have contributed the most, second author(s) second most, and so on. Equal contributions at each level will be listed as "Co-Authors"; if two or more authors contributed the most and contributed equally, they will be noted with an asterisk as "Co-First Authors". If two authors contributed second-most and equally, they will be listed as "Co-Second Authors" and so on.

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The Coalition is intended to be a community-driven activity and where possible governance will be by majority vote of each domain group. Specifically, each Coalition will decide which topics are included as chapters by majority vote of the group. The approach is intended to be inclusive so we will ask that topics be included unless they are considered by the majority to be significantly out of scope.

We intend for the document to reach a broad, international audience, including:

- People involved in the three technology domains: CleanTech, AI, and HealthTech
- Researchers from academic and private institutions
- Investors
- Students
- Policy creators at the corporate level and all levels of government

Chapter 5: Innovative Vector Control Technologies for Neglected Tropical Disease Eradication

Authors: Ricardo Machado, Nicholas Matias

Neglected tropical diseases (NTDs) affect millions globally, particularly in underdeveloped regions. Many of these diseases, including dengue fever, Zika, and sleeping sickness, are transmitted by insects – vectors – such as mosquitoes. Traditional vector control methods, while somewhat effective, often struggle with insecticide resistance, environmental concerns, and the sheer scale of the problem. A significant challenge exists; how do we sustainably and effectively reduce vector populations and, consequently, the burden of these debilitating diseases? One innovative approach gaining traction is the Sterile Insect Technique (SIT).

The Problem

Mosquito-borne diseases represent a pervasive and escalating global public health crisis, impacting millions annually and contributing significantly to morbidity and mortality rates. Mosquitoes, acting as highly efficient biological vectors, facilitate the transmission of a diverse array of pathogenic microorganisms, including viruses, parasites, and filarial worms. These pathogens are transmitted from infected human or animal reservoirs to susceptible healthy individuals. This intricate transmission cycle underpins the sustained prevalence of diseases such as dengue fever, malaria, Zika virus, chikungunya, West Nile virus, and lymphatic filariasis, particularly in tropical and subtropical regions where environmental conditions favor mosquito proliferation.

For decades, the primary strategy for managing these diseases has revolved around conventional vector control methods, predominantly centered on the widespread application of chemical insecticides. While initially effective in reducing mosquito populations and disease incidence, these methods are increasingly confronted with substantial and multifaceted drawbacks, which severely limit their long-term efficacy and sustainability:

Insecticide Resistance: A critical and growing challenge is the evolutionary adaptation of mosquito populations to chemical insecticides. Through natural selection, mosquitoes that possess genetic mutations conferring resistance to specific active ingredients are more likely to survive exposure and to reproduce, passing on these advantageous traits to their offspring. Over time, this leads to widespread insecticide resistance within mosquito populations, rendering previously effective compounds largely ineffective. This phenomenon necessitates the continuous development of new insecticide classes, which is a costly and time-consuming endeavor, often outpaced by the rapid evolution of resistance. The dwindling arsenal of effective insecticides poses a grave threat to global disease control efforts.

Environmental Damage: The broad-spectrum application of chemical insecticides has profound and often irreversible negative impacts on ecosystems. These compounds are rarely species-specific and can cause significant harm to non-target organisms, including beneficial insects (e.g., pollinators including bees), aquatic life, birds, and even mammals. Runoff from sprayed areas can contaminate water sources, leading to bioaccumulation in the food chain and disrupting delicate ecological balances, as was seen with the broad application of DDT in the past. Furthermore, persistent organic pollutants (POPs) derived from some insecticides can remain in the environment for extended periods, posing long-term health risks to both wildlife and human populations.

Logistical Challenges: Implementing conventional insecticide spraying programs on a large scale presents formidable logistical hurdles, particularly in geographically expansive or resource-constrained settings. These challenges include:

- **High Costs:** The procurement of large volumes of insecticides, specialized spraying equipment, fuel, and labor incurs substantial financial outlays, often prohibitive for the low-income countries where mosquito-borne diseases are most prevalent.
- **Infrastructure and Personnel:** Effective spraying campaigns require robust infrastructure for storage, distribution, and maintenance, alongside a well-trained workforce capable of safely and efficiently applying the chemicals. Such resources are frequently lacking in remote or underdeveloped areas.
- **Accessibility:** Reaching remote villages, densely populated urban slums, or inaccessible natural breeding sites can be extremely difficult, leaving significant gaps in coverage and allowing mosquito populations to thrive in untreated areas.
- **Community Acceptance:** Public concerns regarding the health and environmental impacts of chemical spraying can lead to resistance or non-compliance from local communities, undermining the effectiveness of control efforts.

These inherent limitations underscore an urgent and undeniable imperative for a paradigm shift in vector control strategies. There is a pressing need to move beyond sole reliance on chemical insecticides towards the development and deployment of alternative, more sustainable, environmentally benign, and precisely targeted methods. Such innovations are crucial for achieving effective and enduring control over mosquito-borne diseases, ultimately safeguarding global public health.

The Solution: Sterile Insect Technique (SIT)

The Sterile Insect Technique (SIT) stands as a highly effective and environmentally conscious approach to pest management. This innovative method hinges on the principle of introducing a significant population of sterile male insects into a target area. These sterile males then actively compete with their wild counterparts for mating opportunities with wild females. Crucially, any successful mating between a sterile male and a wild female will not result in viable offspring. Through repeated and consistent releases of these sterile males, the overall population of the target insect gradually diminishes over time. In the context of vector control, this translates directly to a reduction in the number of disease-carrying insects, thereby mitigating the spread of various illnesses.

The process of implementing SIT can be broken down into several distinct steps:

1. **Mass Rearing:** The initial phase involves the large-scale rearing of the specific insect species targeted for control (e.g., mosquitoes responsible for transmitting diseases such as dengue, malaria, or Zika). This is conducted in highly specialized facilities designed to optimize conditions for rapid and healthy insect development, ensuring the production of robust individuals.
2. **Sterilization:** Once reared, the male insects undergo a carefully controlled sterilization process. The most common and effective method involves exposure to precise doses of ionizing radiation, such as gamma rays or X-rays. This irradiation renders the males infertile, preventing them from producing viable offspring, but it is meticulously calibrated to ensure that their mating competitiveness and overall behavior remain largely unaffected. The goal is to make them unable to reproduce while still being attractive to wild females.
3. **Release:** Following sterilization, the sterile male insects are released into the designated target areas. This release is often conducted systematically, sometimes even using aerial dispersion methods, to ensure wide and uniform distribution within the wild insect population. The timing and frequency of these

releases are critical for maximizing their impact and outcompeting wild males.

4. **Population Decline:** The core mechanism of SIT comes into play here. When a wild female mates with a sterile male, the absence of viable offspring interrupts the natural reproductive cycle. As the proportion of sterile males in the environment increases with each release, the probability of wild females mating with fertile wild males decreases significantly. This repeated disruption of reproduction leads to a progressive and sustained decline in the overall wild insect population, ultimately reducing the vector's capacity to transmit diseases. This method offers a sustainable alternative to conventional pesticide applications, minimizing ecological disruption while effectively managing vector-borne diseases.

Benefits and Challenges of SIT

SIT presents a compelling strategy in the realm of pest and vector control, offering a unique blend of efficacy and environmental responsibility. However, like any sophisticated technological approach, its implementation is accompanied by a distinct set of benefits and challenges that warrant detailed examination.

Benefits of SIT

Species-Specific Targeting: A cornerstone of SIT's appeal lies in its unparalleled precision. Unlike broad-spectrum insecticides that indiscriminately affect a wide array of organisms, SIT targets only the specific insect species earmarked for control. This focused approach minimizes collateral damage to non-target insects, beneficial pollinators, and other ecologically vital organisms, thereby preserving biodiversity and ecological balance. This specificity stands in stark contrast to the often-disruptive impact of chemical pesticides on entire ecosystems.

Environmental Compatibility: The sterilization process at the heart of SIT—typically involving irradiation—is inherently clean and chemical-free. SIT represents an environmentally friendly alternative to conventional pest control methods that often rely on synthetic chemicals. By circumventing the use of insecticides, SIT eliminates concerns related to chemical residues in the environment, contamination of water sources, and potential harm to wildlife and human health. A critical advantage of SIT is its inherent safety regarding genetic integrity of vector and pathogen. Unlike other biotechnological approaches, SIT does not involve introducing genetic modifications into the target insect species or deliberately infecting wild populations with pathogens. This eliminates the risk of unintended or "runaway" genetic mutations impacting either the disease-causing agents or the vector itself, ensuring a contained and predictable intervention. This alignment with eco-conscious principles makes SIT a highly attractive option for sustainable pest management.

Mitigation of Insecticide Resistance: One of the most persistent and growing challenges in pest control is the development of insecticide resistance. As insects are repeatedly exposed to chemical treatments, their populations can evolve mechanisms to withstand these compounds, rendering the insecticides ineffective over time. SIT, by its very nature, sidesteps this critical issue entirely. Since no insecticides are involved in the process, there is no selective pressure for insects to develop resistance, ensuring the long-term viability and effectiveness of the technique.

Area-Wide Control and Accessibility: SIT possesses an inherent capacity for area-wide control, making it particularly effective in managing pest populations across vast geographical regions. The release of sterile insects, often by aerial means, allows for widespread dispersal, reaching even remote and hard-to-access locations that might be challenging or impractical for conventional chemical applications. This expansive coverage is crucial for controlling highly mobile pest species that can quickly re-infest treated areas.

Long-Term Sustainability: When carefully integrated into a broader, comprehensive vector control program, SIT offers the potential for sustainable, long-term population suppression. Unlike methods that require continuous reapplication, SIT aims to disrupt the reproductive cycle of the pest population, leading to a sustained decline in numbers. This approach can contribute to stable, enduring control of pest populations, reducing the ongoing need for intensive interventions and fostering a more resilient ecosystem.

Challenges of SIT

Complexities of Mass Rearing: The successful deployment of SIT hinges on the ability to rear and maintain astronomically large numbers of the target insect species in a controlled environment. This undertaking presents significant logistical and financial complexities. Program managers must maintain consistent quality, genetic diversity, and competitiveness of these mass-reared insects. Any deficiencies in the rearing process can compromise the insects' ability to compete with wild males for mating opportunities, thereby reducing the overall effectiveness of the program. The skilled care required for insect husbandry, including optimal feeding, temperature, and humidity, demands specialized expertise and substantial infrastructure.

Ecological Impact: Removing an entire species from an ecosystem can result in disruption of food chains and other dependencies for other species. While this is less of a factor when dealing with invasive species that don't belong naturally in the local ecosystem, it is still a concern. According to Dr. Clare Palmer of Texas A&M University, "Deliberate full extinction might occasionally be acceptable, but only extremely rarely."

Potential Sterilization Effects on Competitiveness: While extensive research and refinement have gone into optimizing the sterilization process, a delicate balance remains between achieving complete sterility and preserving the biological fitness of the released males. The irradiation process, though precise, can sometimes inadvertently affect the mating competitiveness, longevity, or overall survival of the sterile insects. Any reduction in their vigor or attractiveness to wild females can significantly diminish the effectiveness of the SIT program. Ongoing research aims to develop even more refined sterilization protocols that minimize these potential adverse effects.

Intricate Logistics of Release: The efficient and effective distribution of sterile insects over large and often diverse geographical areas is a monumental logistical challenge. Careful planning is essential to determine optimal release timings, densities, and methods to ensure widespread coverage and adequate dispersal of the sterile population. Factors such as prevailing winds, terrain, and the behavioral ecology of the target insect must be meticulously considered to maximize the chances of sterile males encountering and mating with wild females. This often necessitates the use of specialized aircraft or ground-based dispersal systems, adding to the operational complexity and cost.

Crucial Role of Public Perception and Acceptance: The success of SIT programs is inextricably linked to public understanding and acceptance. The concept of intentionally releasing insects, even sterile ones, can sometimes trigger public apprehension or misunderstanding. Addressing these concerns through robust public education and community engagement initiatives is absolutely vital. Transparent communication about the benefits of SIT, its safety, and its distinction from harmful pests can foster trust and garner community support, which is indispensable for the long-term success of any area-wide pest control program. This includes explaining that SIT does not rely on genetic modification, even though there is confusion about this with the public. Without strong community buy-in, even the most scientifically sound SIT projects can face significant hurdles.

Substantial Initial and Operational Costs: While SIT offers long-term sustainability benefits, its initial setup and operational costs can be considerably higher than some conventional chemical-based methods. Establishing and maintaining mass-rearing facilities, acquiring specialized equipment for sterilization and release, and funding ongoing research and monitoring programs represent significant investments. However, it is crucial to consider the broader economic and environmental benefits that SIT can deliver over the long term, including reduced reliance on costly insecticides, prevention of crop losses, and improved public health outcomes, which may ultimately outweigh the initial financial outlay.

Examples of SIT Implementation

Screwworm Eradication – A Historic Triumph: One of the most celebrated and pioneering applications of SIT was the eradication of the New World screwworm fly (*Cochliomyia hominivorax*) from North and Central America starting in the 1951 in the U.S. This devastating pest caused immense economic losses to livestock industries by infesting wounds in warm-blooded animals, especially livestock. SIT played an absolutely pivotal role in eliminating this threat, demonstrating the technique's profound potential for area-wide pest eradication, and solidifying its place as a groundbreaking biological control method. The success of the screwworm program provided a powerful proof-of-concept for SIT on a grand scale.

Mosquito Control – Addressing Global Health Threats: SIT is at the forefront of innovative research and implementation efforts aimed at controlling mosquito populations, particularly *Aedes aegypti*. This notorious mosquito species is the primary vector for debilitating arboviral diseases such as dengue, Zika, and chikungunya, which pose significant global public health challenges. Numerous pilot projects and larger-scale initiatives have demonstrated promising results in reducing *Aedes aegypti* populations in various affected regions, offering a sustainable and environmentally sound approach to combating these widespread diseases. The ongoing work in this area holds immense promise for improving human health worldwide.

Fruit Fly Management – Protecting Agricultural Productivity: Beyond public health, SIT is also widely employed and extensively researched for managing agricultural pests, notably various species of fruit flies. These insects can cause significant damage to valuable fruit crops, leading to substantial economic losses for farmers. By releasing sterile fruit flies, SIT effectively disrupts their reproductive cycle, protecting horticultural industries and ensuring food security. This application highlights SIT's versatility and its critical role in integrated pest management strategies across different sectors.

Conclusion: The Transformative Potential of Sterile Insect Technique (SIT) in Neglected Tropical Disease Eradication

SIT is a highly promising and crucial tool in the global fight against neglected tropical diseases. Its significant advantages include unparalleled species-specificity, environmental compatibility, and effectiveness against insecticide resistance. Unlike broad-spectrum pesticides, SIT precisely targets disease-carrying vectors, minimizing harm to beneficial organisms and ecosystems, making it a refined and sustainable vector control solution. This technique's environmental friendliness is a key benefit, as it introduces no harmful chemicals, thereby protecting human health and natural resources. Furthermore, SIT's reliance on mating disruption, rather than chemical agents, allows it to bypass the pervasive problem of insecticide resistance, offering a vital and sustainable alternative where traditional methods fail and avoiding unknown risks from the introduction of genetic modifications or microorganism introduction to wild individuals.

Despite challenges in implementation, ongoing global efforts in research and innovation are continuously improving SIT's deployment. Advancements in automation, AI for insect sexing, and drone technology are streamlining the complex processes of mass-rearing, sterilization, and release. Continued research also focuses on optimizing rearing protocols, enhancing the fitness of sterile insects, and refining release strategies to maximize effectiveness. The development of robust monitoring and evaluation frameworks is also essential to ensure the optimal impact and adaptability of SIT programs. Ultimately, investing in and refining SIT is imperative for the global health community, as embracing this innovative and environmentally responsible technique can lead to more effective and sustainable vector control, significantly reducing the burden of NTDs and paving the way for a healthier future worldwide.

Case Study

The effective deployment of beneficial insects, such as sterile mosquito males, has long been a cornerstone of biological pest control. While the Sterile Insect Technique (SIT) has proven to be a safe and powerful tool over decades, a significant hurdle to its widespread adoption has been the challenge of efficient and scalable insect release. The advent of small, easy-to-operate drone technology has revolutionized this aspect, enabling the homogenous and highly efficient distribution of these insects across vast areas, even in remote or challenging terrains. This simplicity of operation also means that these vital interventions can be deployed locally where they are most needed, directly addressing Neglected Tropical Diseases (NTDs) in the developing countries that suffer the most from their impact.

Ricardo Machado and Nicholas Matias, authors of this section, co-founded BirdView in 2015 to address precisely this challenge. BirdView specializes in packaging and release technologies designed for beneficial insects, leveraging the capabilities of these small drones. The company has developed a modular packaging system that facilitates the decentralized release of adult beneficial insects. This innovation not only streamlines the logistical complexities of large-scale deployments but also contributes to reducing operational costs and enhancing the overall effectiveness of pest control programs, including those focused on vector-borne diseases.

The company's drones have flown more than 67,000 km during more than 12,000 flights, releasing beneficial insects not just to combat disease, but also for agricultural pest management.

BirdView's work demonstrates how integrating readily deployable drone technology with established biological control methods can overcome long-standing limitations, paving the way for more efficient, accessible, and sustainable vector management strategies in vulnerable communities.

Intended Audience and Call to Action

This section is primarily aimed at entrepreneurs, investors, and innovators within the HealthTech space, particularly those interested in novel approaches to global health challenges and sustainable development. We also intend to reach policymakers, public health officials, and non-profit organizations seeking scalable and environmentally responsible solutions for vector-borne diseases.

Our call to action is twofold:

1. **For HealthTech Entrepreneurs and Investors:** We urge you to consider the immense potential of SIT as a disruptive and impactful technology. This is an invitation to explore opportunities for R&D investment, partnership in mass-rearing technologies, development of efficient release mechanisms (e.g., drone integration), and scalable deployment strategies. The market for sustainable vector control is vast and growing, offering significant returns on investment in both financial and social capital.
2. **For Policymakers and Public Health Organizations:** We advocate for increased integration of SIT into national and international vector control programs. This requires supportive regulatory frameworks, dedicated funding, and collaborative initiatives to scale up implementation and overcome existing logistical hurdles. Embracing SIT represents a strategic shift towards more effective, environmentally sound, and long-term solutions for NTD eradication.

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For more information about the Coalition for Innovation,
including how you can get involved, please visit coalitionforinnovation.com.

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