

# COMBATTING NEGLECTED TROPICAL DISEASE - NOW



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Unlike other diseases of global health importance such as HIV/AIDS, malaria, Ebola etc., Neglected Tropical Diseases (NTDs) are not “a disease” but “a complex constellation of diseases”. The diseases labelled as NTDs are often curable and preventable, however they become complicated on account of the far reaching cumulative negative effect they have on individuals and societies. The world has recognized how NTDs are a major impediment to global development and the fight against poverty, reflected in the prominence given to NTDs in the G7 agenda in Germany in 2015 and in Japan in 2016, and to specific inclusion of NTDs within the health targets of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015 (1).

In combatting NTDs, multi-level interventions across public and private sectors, involving local (community), intergovernmental and international stakeholders have been funded over the past decade since the London Declaration on NTDs and the launch of the WHO Roadmap in 2012 (2,3). Most recently during the Global Partners meeting on NTDs held in Geneva on April 19, 2017, governments,

partners, philanthropists and industry representatives pledged over USD 800 million to be spent on pushing towards reaching elimination and eradication targets over the next 5 – 7 years (4).

Funding commitments and intense efforts by multiple stakeholders have resulted in important successes. These include over 6.2 billion cumulative treatments for a disease like lymphatic filariasis since the year 2000 (5), and barely 3,000 cases of Human African trypanosomiasis being recorded in 2015, the lowest ever (6). Various product development partnerships have received support to work with Pharma in screening large compound libraries to identify compounds that have revolutionized treatment for NTDs such as visceral leishmaniasis, trypanosomiasis etc. (7).

Despite the above-mentioned successes, we are still not fully on course to meet our 2020 and 2030 targets (3,8). Many existing solutions to combat NTDs have not been fully optimized, and newer more effective drugs, vaccines, and diagnostics are still needed along with innovative service delivery and access mechanisms. In addition, while research has shown



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that NTD investments are amongst the most cost effective and value for money investments in health which address equity, human rights and improvement in quality of life; barely 0.7% of official development assistance for health is provided to NTDs affecting more than 1 billion people (9).

Aside the need for greater funding commitments, combating NTDs by taking into consideration their complex nature, including their social determinants, calls for urgent efforts towards strengthening research and program implementation capacity at multiple levels within endemic countries (10). Presently there is relatively little support for research capacity strengthening activities. Recently though, the USAID through the Taskforce for global health, has partnered with the African Research Network for Neglected Tropical Diseases to support a small grants program for African NTD researchers. This initiative channels funds

towards research of national importance, initiated by African researchers with the endorsement of their institutions (11). This kind of collaboration needs to be expanded alongside an increase in support for NTD country programmes to ensure they are embedded in the objective of Universal Health Coverage, because their success is a measure of how much we value access to treatment and prevention as a reflection of equity and human rights (5).

While mention of NTDs evokes thoughts of the world poorest countries, investigations have revealed a paradoxical NTD burden among the poor living in G20 countries, a concept that has been labelled “Blue marble health” (12). As such G20 nations, and African governments need to employ innovative approaches to providing focused support for research and capacity building programs, perhaps through a matching fund scheme. Stakeholders also need to

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develop concrete strategies to woo G20 and African philanthropists to contribute more directly and openly to the fight against NTDs. Distinctly referenced in SDG 3, progress in meeting NTD control and eradication targets can be viewed as a “two-way litmus test” of progress to other SDG targets (Water and sanitation, Education, Environment/Climate, Partnerships, one-health) (1). All these are enough reason for all stakeholders to double our efforts and combat NTDs – now! ■