

# Addressing neglected tropical diseases

Neglected tropical diseases (NTDs) are a group of communicable diseases that affect 1.58-billion people globally, 39% of whom live in Africa. Even though these diseases can be prevented and treated, they continue to cause severe disfigurement and other long-term disabilities that create obstacles to education, employment, economic growth and overall development.



Minister of Health of Burkina Faso, Professor Nicolas Mèda and Minister of Health of Rwanda, Dr Diane Gashumba

The policy and advocacy action tank, Speak Up Africa launched a multi-sectoral platform designed to accelerate the elimination of NTDs at the first Galien Forum Africa, held on November 27-28,

With more than one hundred dignitaries from the health and development sector attending the high-level event, Professor Awa-Marie Coll-Seck, Senegalese minister of health, underlined the need to find innovative ways to finally put an end to these debilitating diseases that jeopardise the future of our children.

## Technical means

Combating NTDs and reaching all communities in need can put countries on the pathway to achieving universal health coverage. Where there is poverty, NTDs are commonly an accepted part of life. But this is not inevitable, nor should we accept it. Togo, ranked 165 of 189 countries on the human development index, recently became the first sub-Saharan African country to eliminate lymphatic filariasis.

Similarly, Burkina Faso, which is ranked 183 of 189 countries, with nearly 12.5 million individuals at risk of five NTDs that can be treated by preventive chemotherapy (PC-NTDs), achieved nearly 90% overall coverage in 2016. "We have all the technical means to achieve the elimination of NTDs, from the diagnostics to prevention and treatment tools. What we need now is to rally behind partnerships like ESPEN at the World Health Organisation, which contributes to financing the mass drug administration at the community level, and mobilise all sectors of society to demand an unconditional commitment to the elimination of these debilitating diseases.

"I believe campaigns such as No to NTDs bringing together governments, technical partners and civil society is key to moving us closer to our NTD elimination goal." said Professor Nicolas Meda, minister of health of Burkina Faso.

As we move closer to global Sustainable Development Goals targets, strong national health systems will be critical to ensure that progress towards NTD control and elimination not only accelerates but is sustainable - recognising that these targets can be met only with health systems that can successfully prevent, detect and treat NTDs. Through the No to NTDs movement, individuals, political leaders, private sector companies and civil society organizations (CSOs) come together to increase awareness, prioritisation and national commitment to accelerate the control and elimination of NTDs in Africa. "Empowered communities and civil society organisations are game-changers in health responses. The No to NTDs movement will strengthen the capacity and skills of CSOs for advocacy towards the acceleration of the control and elimination of neglected tropical diseases." said Yacine Djibo, executive director of Speak Up Africa.

## **People-centred approach**

echoed that this type of alliances is essential to reaching NTD elimination. "I strongly encourage all fellow African countries to join this movement and adopt a people-centred approach to eliminate NTDs," said Dr Diane Gashumba, minister of health of Rwanda.

Rwanda has come a long way in its efforts to control NTDs. Thanks to a strong NTD programme based on community interventions, the country does not require treatment for diseases such as lymphatic filariasis, onchocerciasis and trachoma, and achieved a 100% treatment coverage for soil-transmitted helminths in 2016.

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