

Recommendations of the Expanded Special Project for Elimination of Neglected Tropical Diseases (ESPEN) for the Italian G20 Presidency

Accelerating the elimination of the most prevalent neglected tropical diseases (NTDs) in Africa.

Strengthening Health Systems to Support Pandemic Response against COVID-19

ESPEN praises Italy's leadership and prioritization of global health in the G20 Agenda, welcomes and highly appreciates Italy's strong commitment to universal and equitable access to medicines and COVID-19 response, strengthening health systems and emphasizing multilateralism.

Neglected tropical diseases (NTDs) are a group of 20 parasitic and bacterial infectious diseases which disproportionately affect women and girls and people living in poverty and without adequate access to clean water and sanitation. **More than 1.5 billion people around the world are affected by NTDs but only 0,6% of global healthcare funding goes to controlling NTDs.** These diseases cause blindness, painful disfigurement, malnutrition and other health effects and disabilities, and kill more than 500,000 people per year plunging communities into endless cycles of poverty.

ESPEN is a special project of the World Health Organization (WHO), established in the spirit of a public-private partnership with the goal to accelerate the elimination of the five most prevalent NTDs on the African continent (lymphatic filariasis, onchocerciasis, helminthiasis, schistosomiasis and trachoma) responsible for 90% of the NTD disease burden in Africa. As the largest medicine donation and delivery program ESPEN focuses on providing preventive chemotherapy through Mass Drug Administration (MDA) for NTDs complemented by water, sanitation and hygiene interventions (WASH). These are recognized as the most cost-effective elimination strategies against NTDs. **ESPEN is positioned to strengthen health systems working in governance, and providing technical and operational support to endemic countries in Africa to accelerate elimination of the most common NTDs.** ESPEN works with countries to improving access to NTD interventions in conflict affected areas mitigating the impact of health emergencies on the population. The program aims to equip African government and stakeholders with innovative digital tools to collect and openly share disease specific treatment and programmatic data enabling evidence-based planning, improved decision making and efficient investments.

People suffering from **NTDs have a higher risk of acquiring or dying from COVID-19 or other infectious and non-communicable diseases.** In communities living in poverty, the virus is likely to spread more rapidly because these communities may not be able to implement the most effective prevention measures such as regular hand washing without readily available water and soap, or social distancing measures due to the living conditions.

With the help of the ESPEN partnership, 450 million of the 600 million people affected by NTDs in Africa are currently being protected every year. It costs less than 0,50 eurocents per treatment per year in order to deliver donated drugs to protect vulnerable communities and to avert death. Additional **investments from international donors to close the treatment gap and contribute to attain universal health coverage** are urgently needed to support the **COVID-19 response in Africa** and reach the remaining 150 million people who miss out on **preventive treatment for NTDs** due to lack of funding for treatment distribution.

Achievements are at risk because of the current COVID-19 pandemic. In March 2021, about 4 million cases and more than 100.000 deaths were reported in the African Region. The COVID-19

pandemic has caused disruption in essential NTD interventions. Between 20-80% of MDA had to be postponed, about 30% of donated medicines expired, health education, surgical procedures and capacity building were postponed or had to be stopped in many African countries and are only slowly taken up. Delays in preventive treatment require additional rounds of MDA involving significant cost increases. Failing to complete MDA will deprive populations of essential drugs, hamper pandemic prevention and leaving vulnerable communities further behind.

COVID-19 and NTDs can both be prevented by taking similar preventive measures through utilizing NTD community health workers, laboratory and testing services, medicine distribution channels, health education, behaviour change training and implementing improved WASH facilities. 80% of African NTD Community health workers are currently involved in the COVID-19 response actions. Leveraging and strengthening NTD programs will not only work to support the COVID-19 response and decrease the risk of acquiring COVID-19 and other infectious and non-communicable diseases in Africa, it will also accelerate the elimination of the most prevalent NTDs in Africa, and alleviate the suffering of women and girls who bear the largest burden of consequence of the NTDs. Without addressing NTDs, the broader aim of poverty alleviation which severely hampers human development and the Sustainable Development Goals are unlikely to be achieved.

NTD programs with well-established health infrastructures, trained community health workers and communication channels play a key role in COVID-19 response actions. An integrated COVID-19 and NTD response is highly successful due to high-levels of community trust and engagement and the use of existing networks and infrastructures. Investments in NTD control programs will support existing global investments towards the GAVI COVAX AMC and the ACT-Accelerator as NTD programs train thousands of community health workers, provide health care platforms and strengthen health systems which are urgently needed in the COVID-19 response actions, including vaccine delivery.

ESPEN urges G20 Leaders, G20 Ministers of Health and G20 Ministers of Finance to ensure that

- Investments in **NTD control programs which play a key role in COVID-19 response actions** are sustained and increased.
- **COVID-19 response actions can be maximized by integrating them into NTD control** and elimination efforts. A dual approach towards COVID-19 and NTDs have been highly successful due to high levels of community trust and engagement and the use of existing networks. Communication channels and health care infrastructures established by NTD programs have been re-purposed to training and capacity building on COVID-19, risk communication and promotion of hygiene measures.
- There needs to be **recognition and prioritization of the role and benefit of NTD programs in strengthening of health systems.** Achievements in the fight against NTDs and reaching the 2030 goals are at risk due because of the current COVID-19 pandemic. Further delay of the successful implementation of NTD programs will jeopardize progress made, involve significant cost increases, deprive populations of essential drugs leaving them further behind.
- **Enhance and support NTD intervention programs** which contribute to **pandemic preparedness**, improve regional cooperation, **strengthen Africa-based public health capacity**, help vulnerable communities to stay healthy, reach people beyond the formal health systems and **reduce the spread of COVID-19.**