

ESPEN'S CRITICAL ROLE IN HEALTH SYSTEMS STRENGTHENING

ABOUT ESPEN

The Expanded Special Project for Elimination of Neglected Tropical Diseases (ESPEN) was established in May 2016 in the spirit of a partnership between WHO Regional Office for Africa, the African Member States, Pharmaceutical companies and Neglected Tropical Diseases (NTD) partners to mobilize political, technical and financial resources to accelerate the elimination of the 5 most prevalent NTDs - lymphatic filariasis, onchocerciasis, schistosomiasis, soil transmitted helminthiasis and trachoma - in Africa by preventive chemotherapy delivered through Mass Drug Administration (MDA), complemented by hygiene, water and sanitation, the most cost-effective elimination strategy against NTDs. The ESPEN partnership reaches every year 450 million of the 600 million people affected by NTDs in Africa, protecting them from the morbidity and mortality of these 5 NTDs.

Emergency responses in the past have demonstrated that approaches which only look at a single disease or provide a single type of intervention cannot deliver long lasting impact. Therefore health systems strengthening (HSS) and a coordinated approach to fight infectious diseases are the most successful ways to achieve sustainable impact leading to better health through improvements in access, coverage, quality and efficiency.

HEALTH SYSTEMS STRENGTHENING IS ONE OF ESPEN'S MAIN STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES.

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 all African governments empowering them to have the data, expertise and financial resources they need in the fight against these disfiguring and debilitating diseases.

ESPEN helps to reinforce African health systems according to the 6 building components defined by the WHO and designed to sustainably improve country health system performance:

► Health service delivery

ESPEN improves the effective use of donated medicines through [enhanced supply chain management](#). Every year more than one billion donated medicines are managed through ESPEN to reach every corner in Africa. The program is working with governments to ensure that all donated tablets are procured and adequately distributed to the intended population in a timely manner. This requires a very strong supply chain system starting from medicine request, to medicine approval, production, shipment to all African countries, storage in the capital cities upon reception, distribution from central level to the district level, distribution to the beneficiaries and reverse logistics of the unused product to avoid wastage, and ensure that unutilized drugs are appropriately stored and repurposed when needed.

Examples of past successes: By 2019 the ESPEN partnership has completed mapping for lymphatic filariasis, soil transmitted helminthiasis and schistosomiasis, with some remaining gaps for trachoma and onchocerciasis. Every endemic country in Africa has started MDA. 10 countries no longer require treatment for trachoma. Ethiopia achieved 100% geographical coverage for trachoma MDA for the first time through ESPEN support. Togo and Malawi successfully eliminated lymphatic filariasis as a public health problem. Ghana became first sub-Saharan country to eliminate trachoma as a public health problem. Just in 2019 through missions to countries and supply chain analysis and review, about 237 million tablets were saved with an estimated worth of 18,5 million USD. In 2020 MDA campaigns across 20 countries provided about 120 million treatments and reached almost 70 million individuals.

Health workforce

Every year ESPEN provides high-quality training to hundreds of individuals on various areas such as laboratory surveillance, data reporting and collection, disease prevention and control, behaviour change, promotion of hygiene measures, supply chain management, drug distribution, diagnosis and surveillance. The partnership has been training and building a large number of community health workers (CHWs) and community drug distributors who are present in every community in endemic countries in Africa, covering the entire continent on a ratio of one CHW per 100-250 individuals, reaching all vulnerable groups in need. Capacity is also built among Ministry of Health workers and civil society organizations.

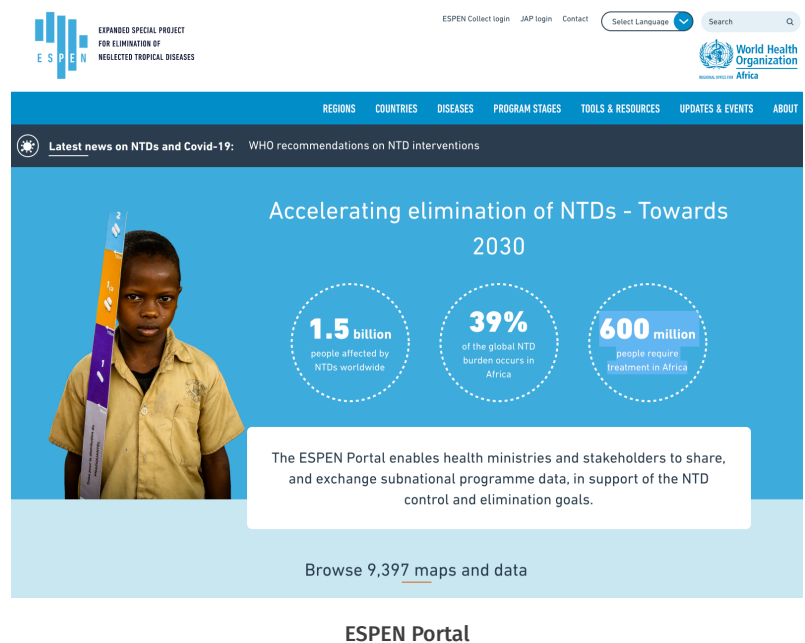
Health information systems

ESPEN has developed the first ever robust continental online atlas, the [ESPEN Portal](#) for infectious diseases in Africa, which contains disaggregated subnational level information up to community level enabling evidence-based planning and decision-making. About 10.000 maps and data sets are available to date which are planned to be extended to HIV/AIDS, TB, malaria, COVID-19 and WASH data. Via this openly accessible online platform countries share data on historical and contemporary distribution of NTDs, including disease specific epidemiological surveys, treatment coverage and other programmatic data.

A mobile app, the [ESPEN Collect](#), has been developed to enable easy accurate and real time data collection by Community Health Workers. The data entered is automatically analysed and openly shared in the ESPEN Portal. These vital tools enable [data analysis to support smart, targeted investments and efficient use of donated drugs](#).

Access to essential medicines

Access to NTD treatment is also a crucial component of the “leave no one behind” approach to [achieving universal health coverage](#) (UHC). ESPEN’s mission is to scale up MDA to achieve 100% geographic and effective coverage, a key priority in attaining UHC. Improved access to treatment to those in need in Africa and building African government capacity to reach people that are currently left out of the health system are a key task of ESPEN.



ESPEN was recognized as a ground-breaking public-private partnership and received the **UHC Innovative Partnership Award** at the 2018 UHC UNGA conference in New York.

Health systems financing

ESPEN acts as a development “broker” bringing together key stakeholders to raise the need for funding NTD programs. ESPEN and its partners provide advocacy support on domestic resource mobilization with the goal to increase national budgets for NTD programs. The partnership helps governments to develop and endorse national strategic plans against NTDs (NTD Master plans) which are integrated into health systems financing and signed by Ministers of Health and Finance.

Cross-sectoral coordination at national and local levels also enables countries to pursue the efficient use of NTD funding to achieve NTD targets and milestones. Countries are empowered to take greater leadership in financing their own development which is the long-term path to sustainable development finance. It is also a critical step on the way out of aid dependence.

Leadership and governance

Building ownership at the country level is one of the key achievements and principles of success of ESPEN. The partnership works together with governments on the development and implementation of NTD control programs, including long-term planning, accountability, political commitment and alignment with the newly launched NTD Road Map 2030. ESPEN also works with civil society by engaging with communities on the planning, execution and evaluation of the health interventions.

Investing in ESPEN strengthens health systems and creates capacity to reach people beyond the formal health system. NTD intervention programs help vulnerable communities to stay healthy, reduce the spread of the COVID-19 and the risk of other infectious diseases and future health threats.

