

ESPEN'S CONTRIBUTION TO COVID-19 RESPONSE:

THE EXPANDED SPECIAL PROJECT FOR ELIMINATION OF NEGLECTED TROPICAL DISEASES (ESPEN):

In 2016, the Expanded Special Project for Elimination of NTDs (ESPEN) was established in the spirit of partnership between WHO Regional Office for Africa, Member States, and Neglected Tropical Diseases (NTD) partners to accelerate lagging progress against the goals of the London Declaration on NTDs in Africa. ESPEN's focus is on the 5 most prevalent NTDs in Africa (lymphatic filariasis, onchocerciasis, helminthiasis, schistosomiasis and trachoma) which account for 90% of Africa's NTD burden that can be prevented and treated with preventive chemotherapy through Mass Drug Administration (MDA).

NTDs impact the lives of more than 1.5 billion of the world's poorest people, including 600 million in Africa. NTDs cause immeasurable suffering, create cycles of poverty and cost developing nations billions of dollars every year. WHO estimates that up to 200,000 people die in Africa every year as a consequence of the 5 most prevalent NTDs when medicine distribution does not occur. With access to 15 billion Euro in safe and effective drugs donated by pharmaceutical partners, ESPEN reduces the cost of treating all 5 of the high-burden diseases it targets to just 0,50 eurocent per person treated annually (treatment delivered). **In addition, for every 1 million Euro invested in ESPEN, 26 million Euro worth of donated drugs will be leveraged, which will avert death and disability for about 20 million people in Africa.**

ESPEN was recognized as a ground-breaking public-private partnership at the 2018 Universal Health Coverage (UHC) conference organized during the United Nations General Assembly in New York and received **the UHC Innovative Partnership Award**.

With country ownership and leadership of their NTD programs as a guiding principle, ESPEN contributes to the broader WHO target of UHC, long-term sustainability, and strengthening of health systems by focusing on five main strategic objectives:



1. Access to treatment: Scaling up treatments to achieve **100% geographical coverage, leaving no one behind**.



2. Surveillance and capacity building: Scaling down activities by supporting countries to stop interventions and treatments and obtain WHO validation as soon as elimination is achieved. As part of this initiative, laboratory strengthening becomes key.



3. Supply chain management: Improving the effective use of donated medicines through enhanced supply chain management. ESPEN is working with governments to ensure that all donated tablets are procured and distributed to the intended population in a timely manner and without wastage, and any unutilized drugs are appropriately stored and repurposed when needed.



4. Information and data management systems: Strengthening information systems for evidence-based action: two major tools were created to implement this objective: the **ESPEN Portal** and the **ESPEN Collect**. The ESPEN Portal was created as a platform to enable governments and other stakeholders to share subnational NTD data. The ESPEN Collect is a mobile data collection tool that enables offline, standardized data collection that improves the quality and timeliness of data.



5. Advancing progress on sustainability through efforts to enhance **country ownership** and **strengthening health systems**. ESPEN recognizes variations in health systems functioning, as it seeks to support the mainstreaming of different NTD programme components—such as advocacy, social mobilization, water and sanitation, preventive chemotherapy, and case management.

NTDs AND COVID-19:

In the African region, COVID-19 is evolving and cases have been confirmed in every African country. Given the vulnerability of healthcare systems, the spread of the virus could have devastating effects. So far as of September 2020, 22,000 people have lost their lives due to COVID-19 in the AFRO region (mostly in South Africa). However, figures of a recent study of the WHO Regional Office for Africa estimate that up to 190,000 people could die from COVID-19 in Africa and over 40 million could get infected in the first year of the pandemic if containment measures fail.

At present, in Africa there are 600 million people at risk for NTDs and therefore also belong to the higher-risk group for COVID-19. African countries are assessing the evolution of the pandemic in their national territories and making the public health decisions they consider most appropriate according to the epidemiology of the different health threats they face, including COVID-19 and NTDs.

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.

Medicines provided by the preventive chemotherapy package are both curative and preventive and they contribute to break the cycle of transmission when combined with WASH interventions.

Controlling NTDs can curb COVID-19: COVID-19 and NTDs can both be prevented by taking very similar preventative measures

ESPEN'S ROLE IN THE FIGHT AGAINST COVID-19 ON THE AFRICAN CONTINENT:

In April 2020 WHO recommendation of postponement for MDA for NTDs were followed by many African countries. By June 2020 Angola, Benin, DRC, Niger, Malawi, South Sudan, Mozambique, Guinea Conakry, Madagascar, Togo were ready to implement MDA despite COVID-19. In August 2020 WHO released further guidance to resume treatments where possible.

ESPEN has developed specific risk mitigation documents to avoid risk during MDA and to further contribute to the fight against COVID-19 during MDA.

As such ESPEN will continue providing operational support to countries acknowledging that they are in the driving seat in their domestic fight against health threats including NTDs and COVID-19, and support them to put in place the appropriate protective measures. Further, **ESPEN is working very closely with African governments to ensure the valued donated medicines are managed appropriately to avoid wastage and expiration as much as possible.**

Emergency responses in the past have demonstrated that vertical approaches cannot deliver long lasting impact. Therefore the ESPEN model which involves working with governments, strengthening health systems and promoting a coordinated approach to fight infectious diseases are the most successful ways to achieve sustainable impact.

DETAILED COVID-19 RESPONSE ACTIVITIES UNDER EACH STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE OF ESPEN:

ESPEN's main strategic pillars aim to eliminate the most prevalent NTDs while also addressing the COVID-19 pandemic:

ESPEN OBJECTIVE 1: ACCESS PLATFORM AND BEHAVIOUR CHANGE

In the context of COVID-19, community interventions are critical to stop the spread of disease, to detect health problems early and to provide healthcare support.

Promotion of hygiene, clean water and sanitation: ESPEN is working with a large number of Community Health Workers (CHW) who are present in every community in Africa, covering the entire continent on a ratio of one CHW per 100-250 individuals. They are the backbone of every health system helping remote communities to have access to hygiene and sanitation

measures. CHWs provide education on sanitation measures and health promotion, influence behavior change of vulnerable communities to prevent infection and contribute to disease surveillance and delivery of medication and supplies (e.g. deworming tablets, bed nets, micronutrients, handwashing facilities, etc.). Each CHW has a register with a census of the population they serve, providing information such as age, sex, health intervention received on each individual in each household. With this process each CHW will be empowered using tools to combat COVID-19 and NTDs in the communities.

ESPEN OBJECTIVE 2: SURVEILLANCE AND LABORATORY CAPACITY BUILDING

It is imperative to strengthen laboratory capacity in Africa in order to test whether people are infected with NTDs and COVID-19.

ESPEN is building high-quality assured laboratory capacity with capacity to perform PCR and ELISA testing that can be repurposed for case detection, surveillance and data management for COVID-19 and other diseases. ESPEN Laboratory in Burkina Faso has the capacity to be a hub and centre of excellence for the region to support capacity building and quality control/quality assurance for COVID-19 and NTDs. A strong laboratory data reporting system will be put in place which allows transparent data sharing and publication on the ESPEN Portal. Data gathered at subnational level data will be critical for a prompt response to outbreaks.

ESPEN OBJECTIVE 3: SUPPLY CHAIN MANAGEMENT

Every year more than one billion donated medicines are managed through ESPEN to reach every corner in Africa. This requires a very strong supply chain system starting from medicine request, to medicine approval, production, shipment to all countries in Africa, 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.

Under this project, **ESPEN will strengthen health systems for enhanced supply chain management** of medicines and commodities to provide an appropriate response to fight NTDs and COVID-19. This will allow adequate distribution and accountability of any donated product such as medicines, hand washing facilities, masks, gloves, diagnostic test and more.

A mobile app helps with the entry by bar code of any donated product and any geographical location (e.g. donated tests are registered by bar code at central, district and community level to be able to track the donation by GPS).

With appropriate investments, ESPEN will work with governments in all African countries and other UN agencies such as UNICEF to support the distribution and appropriate use of the hand washing facilities, masks and other commodities that are being donated to fight this pandemic. **Thanks to the supply chain systems that ESPEN has established in every country in Africa (through the national health systems), ESPEN can support the governments to distribute these donated products with efficiency and cost savings representing excellent value for money.**

ESPEN OBJECTIVE 4: STRENGTHENING INFORMATION AND DATA MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS

ESPEN has developed the **first ever continental online atlas** for infectious diseases in Africa, which contains disaggregated subnational level information up to community level. This tool, called **the ESPEN Portal**, contains information on the 5 most prevalent NTDs. Via this online platform countries openly share data on historical and contemporary distribution of NTDs, including disease specific epidemiological surveys, treatment coverage and other programmatic data.

The ESPEN Portal will be expanded under this project to cover Malaria, other NTDs, HIV, TB, WASH interventions and COVID-19. Key indicators to be included in the portal are: epidemiological distribution of malaria (prevalence at community level), mapping of interventions such as indoor residual spray and bed net distribution), COVID-19 cases (site level distribution of cases), WASH facilities and WASH interventions. These indicators will be displayed alongside with the current NTD indicators: NTD epidemiology at site level, NTD interventions, coverage, epidemiological assessments and impact of interventions on disease transmission. The illustration of malaria, NTD, COVID-19 and WASH indicators together in the same site allows (i) to identify areas of potential synergies across NTD, WASH and COVID (ii) to distinguish febrile cases due to malaria versus COVID-19 and (iii) to maximise efficiency in supply chain by synchronizing interventions.

Having access to the information on WASH and COVID-19 on the same site and at community level will be tremendously beneficial in the response against the Corona pandemic, being able to identify areas where more interventions are needed and prioritize the scarce resources available.

A mobile app (free of charge), **ESPEN Collect**, has been developed to enable accurate and real time data collection and information using preloaded standardized data collection forms which can be used by CHW. The data entered is automatically sent to ESPEN. The mobile app can be used off-line and data can be stored off-line and sent when connectivity is available.

ESPEN Collect and ESPEN Portal are critical tools to disseminate information to communities and health workers as well as to share key data with stakeholders and donors.

Thanks to ESPEN Collect, community health workers can receive instant messages, report on case finding, receive updated materials and conduct surveys in real time. The entire information is received, managed and stored by ESPEN and can be shared through the ESPEN Portal online. The information in the portal is displayed by geographical location. This enables to trace geographical aggregation of cases, identify opportunities to integrate activities and geographical areas that need to be reinforced.

ESPEN OBJECTIVE 5: SUSTAINABILITY, COUNTRY OWNERSHIP AND STRENGTHENING OF HEALTH SYSTEMS

Together with its partners ESPEN is contributing towards UHC by providing access to treatment to those in need in Africa, building African capacity to reach people beyond the health system and improving supply chain management to ensure every donated tablet reaches the children and families who need them most.

ESPEN has built up reliable health infrastructures by working with and through national governments and offers an access platform for medical interventions against COVID-19 and other future pandemics.

The ESPEN model displays the following characteristics for success to create long term and sustainable change:

- Presence in every country in Africa by a WHO office. The WHO representative is in direct communication with the respective Minister of Health.
- Work with the civil society to engage communities on the planning, execution and evaluation of the health interventions.
- Development of policies and documentation that enable long term planning, accountability, and political commitment.

ESPEN will support each African country to develop and endorse a Master Plan 2021-2025 for NTDs to reflect the areas described under the five main objectives.

Investing in NTD delivery programs strengthens health systems while also providing surveillance platform and creating capacity to reach people beyond the formal health system. NTD intervention programs help vulnerable communities to stay healthy and reduce the spread of the COVID-19 outbreak.