

# THE FIGHT AGAINST NEGLECTED TROPICAL DISEASES (NTDs) - THE ROLE OF ESPEN IN IMPROVING WOMEN'S HEALTH AND STRENGTHENING HEALTH SYSTEMS

NTDs are a group of treatable and preventable diseases that continue to affect over 1.5 billion people of the world's most impoverished, marginalized, and remote communities. Nearly 40% of the global NTD burden occurs in Africa which contributes to the vicious cycle of poverty-disease-poverty. Only 0,6% of global healthcare funding goes to controlling NTDs.

NTDs disproportionately affect women and girls who bear the largest burden of infection and consequence of disease predominantly through socio-cultural reasons, and through biological factors. Women and girls often have the least access to medical attention.

Fortunately, the most prevalent NTDs can be targeted by applying preventive chemotherapy, which involves large-scale distribution of high quality, safety-tested NTD medicines.

In 2016, the WHO AFRO launched the Expanded Special Project for Elimination of Neglected Tropical Diseases (ESPEN). ESPEN is a public-private partnership between WHO Regional Office for Africa, Member States and NTD partners in an effort to mobilize political, technical and financial resources to reduce the burden of the five most prevalent NTDs (onchocerciasis, lymphatic filariasis, schistosomiasis, soil-transmitted helminthiasis and trachoma) in Africa, which are amenable to preventive chemotherapy through Mass Drug Administration (MDA).

The pharmaceutical sector has made substantial commitments to donate these lifesaving drugs to WHO. To ensure that these drugs reach all who need them, it is crucial to support delivery programs such as ESPEN.

## THE EFFECTS OF NTDs ON WOMEN AND GIRLS

NTDs pose dangerous physical health risks, particularly for women and girls, including for their reproductive health. Research shows that women have increased biological vulnerability to develop certain NTD-associated morbidities:

Take **schistosomiasis also known as bilharzia**, caused by parasites in people's digestive or urinary tracts. In women, schistosomiasis can manifest as female genital schistosomiasis, which can lead to infertility, miscarriage, cervical cancer and a 300%



increased risk of contracting HIV/AIDS. Prevention and treatment of female genital schistosomiasis is a social justice, reproductive health and human rights issue.







It is estimated that one out of every three pregnant women in endemic countries is infected with **hookworm, a type of soil-transmitted helminth**. This NTD causes iron deficiency anaemia and increased blood loss during childbirth, low birth weight, pregnancy complications, infant mortality and even maternal death.

Adult women are two to four times more likely than men to develop **trachoma-related blindness**. This is because water-based domestic activities such as washing clothes, cooking, and childcare activities such as bathing young children can increase the chance of contracting the disease. This risk is extended to both young girls and elderly women, who are often asked to help with these chores.

Women with lymphatic filariasis-associated morbidities such as **elephantiasis** have fewer opportunities for marriage because of disfigurement and disability, thus causing further stigmatization and long-lasting impact to their social and economic wellbeing.

No woman or girl should endure this fate. For less than 0,50 eurocents per treatment, per year, we can deliver the donated drugs needed to protect women and adolescents against these devastating NTDs, making it one of public health's best buys.

Programs to combat NTDs, such as ESPEN, directly contribute to implementation of French policy priorities, such as improving the position and rights of women and girls, tackling poverty-reduction, reaching the Sustainable Development Goals, enhancing health systems and social equality.



**Supporting ESPEN results in an immense return on investment and impact in Africa:**

**A contribution of €1 million for ESPEN will leverage € 26 in donated medicines to improve the lives of millions of people in Africa.**

With modest investments in ESPEN, partners can help Health Ministries expand access to healthcare, strengthen health systems, advance NTD elimination goals, protect the most vulnerable communities from five deadly and devastating diseases and improve millions of lives.

Together with its partners, ESPEN is contributing towards Universal Health Coverage by providing access to mass drug administration to the most marginalized populations in Africa, and improving supply chain management to ensure all donated NTD medicines reach the children and families who need them.

## RECENT MILESTONES OF ESPEN



ESPEN highlights what governments, health and development organizations, donors, and private companies can achieve when they work together. In 2018, Ghana became the first sub-Saharan African country to eliminate Trachoma. In 2017, Togo successfully eliminated lymphatic filariasis as a public health problem. In 2020, Malawi eliminated lymphatic filariasis as a public health problem. Overall, more people are being reached with NTD treatment and fewer are at risk than at any other point in history.



In 2019, ESPEN provided funding to scale up MDA to deliver treatments, reaching a total population of more than 61 million people in 778 districts across 26 countries.



The ESPEN partnership has supported 44 governments in developing modernized NTD strategies through 2020.



ESPEN has worked relentlessly with countries and their partners to compile over 4.000 maps, and to include trachoma in the ESPEN portal. As of 2019, 45 countries are sharing data on the portal, in an effort to increase transparency and support informed decision-making across geographic borders.



ESPEN's analysis allowed retrieval of approximately 657 million medicine tablets, previously lost or unaccounted for saving no less than 91 million USD value in donated medicines between 2017 and 2019. This was thanks to the provision of in-country technical support and critical review of applications for donated medicines.



[HTTP://ESPEN.AFRO.WHO.INT](http://ESPEN.AFRO.WHO.INT)

To learn more about partnership opportunities, please contact ESPEN's Team Leader, Dr. Maria Rebollo Polo: [rebollopolom@who.int](mailto:rebollopolom@who.int).