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NEGLECTED TROPICAL DISEASES

Although cost-effective public health interventions are available to control and eliminate neglected tropical diseases (NTDs), people living without access to adequate sanitation, basic infrastructure and health services continue to bear a disproportionately high burden of these diseases.

In the Western Pacific Region, one or more of 15 NTDs are endemic to 28 countries and areas. Progressive success in the elimination of lymphatic filariasis and trachoma through preventive chemotherapy has shown one way to address this high burden and finish the job of eliminating NTDs. Increasing evidence also demonstrates that more effective control of NTDs is possible when countries deliver preventive chemotherapy with coordinated multisectoral actions. These actions include enhancements of water and sanitation systems, veterinary public health and food safety strengthening for all vulnerable or hard-to-reach populations affected by NTDs. Intersectoral collaboration and partnerships can play a leading role in empowering communities to sustain enhancements.

The Regional Committee for the Western Pacific is requested to consider for endorsement the draft *Regional Framework for Control and Elimination of Neglected Tropical Diseases in the Western Pacific*.

1. CURRENT SITUATION

Neglected tropical diseases (NTDs) are a diverse group of disease conditions that are most common in tropical and subtropical regions. These diseases most heavily affect people living without access to adequate sanitation, basic infrastructure and health services. In addition to significant morbidity and mortality, these diseases can lead to stigma and discrimination in communities.

WHO prioritizes 20 diseases affecting more than 1 billion people in 149 countries as NTDs. Of these, 15 are endemic in 28 countries and areas in the Western Pacific Region. These diseases are prioritized not only because of the magnitude and impact of their burden, but also because they are amenable to broad control, elimination or eradication by delivering one or more of the five interventions recommended by WHO. The interventions are: (1) preventive chemotherapy; (2) veterinary public health; (3) provision of safe water, sanitation and hygiene; (4) vector and intermediate host control; and (5) case management and rehabilitation.

In 2012, WHO and partners adopted *Accelerating Work to Overcome the Global Impact of Neglected Tropical Diseases: A Roadmap for Implementation*. The Roadmap set out goals and targets to be reached by 2020 and strategies for each NTD based on World Health Assembly resolutions and global initiatives. In the same year, the Regional Committee endorsed the *Regional Action Plan for Neglected Tropical Diseases in the Western Pacific Region (2012–2016)* (WPR/RC63.R4), setting disease-specific elimination and control goals, in line with the NTD Roadmap.

Since then, the Western Pacific Region has seen remarkable progress, primarily through preventive chemotherapy or so-called mass drug administration. From 2016 to 2017, six countries (Cambodia, Cook Islands, Marshall Islands, Niue, Tonga and Vanuatu) were validated for elimination of lymphatic filariasis as a public health problem. These are the first countries in the world to be validated, since China in 2007 and the Republic of Korea in 2008. Cambodia and the Lao People's Democratic Republic became the first countries in the Region to be validated for elimination of blinding trachoma in 2017. The burden of schistosomiasis in many endemic areas of the Region has also been reduced significantly, to the point that elimination is now within reach. In addition, many countries have institutionalized nationwide annual or semi-annual rounds of deworming in children, resulting in reduced prevalence of soil-transmitted helminthiasis in many areas.

With these achievements, the NTD landscape in the Western Pacific Region is changing. While intensified campaigns can accelerate elimination of some NTDs, efforts are under way to gradually expand focus from dependence on preventive chemotherapy to combining preventive chemotherapy with a whole-of-system multisectoral approach to accelerate control and elimination of NTDs. This

approach will be informed by accurate determination of burden and distributions through strengthened surveillance, including in pre- and post-elimination settings.

In 2017, three disease conditions were added to the global NTD portfolio, namely scabies and other ectoparasitic infestations, snakebite envenoming, and chromoblastomycosis and other deep mycoses. As new disease conditions are added, actions must be taken to assess the most effective way to integrate them into the overall framework for control and elimination of NTDs.

NTDs are included in the Sustainable Development Goals. Universal health coverage will be key for NTD control and elimination, helping sustain gains by ensuring that needed health services reach all people, particularly marginalized and neglected populations. The Sustainable Development Goals present opportunities to accelerate progress on NTDs through whole-of-system multisectoral interventions, such as improvements in water and sanitation, food safety, environmental health and veterinary public health, in addition to health services.

Acknowledging progress and recognizing opportunities, the NTD Programme Managers Meeting and the 16th Meeting of the Western Pacific Regional Programme Review Group on NTDs in 2016 recommended that WHO consult with Member States and develop a new regional plan. Accordingly, the draft *Regional Framework for Control and Elimination of Neglected Tropical Diseases in the Western Pacific* supports twin approaches: (1) to accelerate control and elimination of NTDs that are amenable to early elimination through the use of existing interventions; and (2) to encourage adoption of multisectoral interventions and strengthened surveillance coordinated within the overall health system for NTDs requiring more comprehensive responses.

2. ISSUES

2.1 The need to address “unfinished business” and eliminate NTDs with available tools

The elimination of lymphatic filariasis and trachoma as public health problems in countries and areas in the Western Pacific Region has been achieved through the commitment and diligence of Member States to conduct mass drug administrations in all endemic communities annually, with pharmaceutical donors and partners to supply medicines and operational support. Building on this success, yaws-endemic countries in the Western Pacific Region are extending efforts to eradicate the disease through mass drug administration. Regional success in significantly reducing the burden of schistosomiasis increases the feasibility of accelerating efforts to eliminate the disease from the Region.

Eradication and elimination of communicable diseases are global public goods that benefit the population as a whole. With the availability of proven elimination strategies, large-scale donation of medicines and decades of experience of Member States in conducting mass drug administration, completing the unfinished business of eliminating NTDs in the Western Pacific Region should be an ethical priority.

2.2 The need to shift the paradigm to effectively combat all NTDs

While some of NTDs are amenable to eradication or elimination with mass drug administration as the principal strategy, increasing evidence demonstrates that controlling or eliminating other NTDs requires comprehensive multisectoral actions, such as enhancement of the water supply and sanitation coverage, veterinary public health, increased access to vaccines and antisera, food safety and vector control interventions, for all vulnerable and affected populations.

The need for comprehensive multisectoral action goes beyond containment and elimination of transmission of NTDs. Many NTDs cause debilitating residual morbidities and disabilities, such as lymphedema and hydrocele associated with lymphatic filariasis, blindness due to trachoma, or severe skin lesions and deformities due to leprosy, yaws and Buruli ulcer. Such residual morbidities and disabilities remain even after countries have achieved elimination targets. As such, they require well-coordinated partnerships to deliver sustained access to curative and rehabilitative services beyond elimination.

2.3 The role of NTDs in fostering community engagement and empowerment

Globally NTDs are now less neglected than ever, as a result of strong pledges and partnerships between governments, donors and partners. However, the “neglect” of these diseases by affected populations continues in some endemic countries. Despite years of preventive chemotherapy, some affected populations continue to lack awareness and basic knowledge on transmission of NTDs. As a result, prevention and control remain challenging, with non-compliance to treatment and persistent risk behaviours, such as the use of infested river water, open defecation, and unhygienic handling of food and livestock, which often result in reinfection.

Public health interventions and services are only effective when they reach the people who need them. Their impact is sustainable when people understand the need, demand the services, and own and drive changes that prevent continued transmission. NTDs are more visible than many other communicable diseases because many are caused by macroparasites and cause visible chronic morbidities and disabilities. This visibility makes NTDs a powerful tool to engage and mobilize affected communities. Well-coordinated multisectoral interventions and public health services for all

vulnerable and hard-to-reach populations affected by NTDs should be considered an opportunity and entry point to engage and empower people, families and communities to strengthen their behaviours relating to health.

2.4 Weak surveillance capacity to move towards and beyond elimination of NTDs

With successful interventions and significant reductions in transmission of diseases, enhanced laboratory and surveillance capacity becomes more and more critical in order to deliver targeted interventions and measure their impact.

The need for effective surveillance does not end with elimination of a disease. Even in countries having achieved elimination status, residual transmission may persist. The disease may also be reintroduced from other countries with active transmission, particularly those countries with limited overall health system capacities. Sustained laboratory and surveillance capacity to continuously detect cases and foci of transmission and enable targeted response is required beyond elimination of NTDs.

As NTD transmission typically occurs in the resource-limited and hard-to-reach communities, opportunities for strengthening integrated surveillance platforms should be maximized with other communicable diseases and beyond in the context of broader health system strengthening.

3. ACTIONS PROPOSED

The Regional Committee for the Western Pacific is requested to consider for endorsement the draft *Regional Framework for Control and Elimination of Neglected Tropical Diseases in the Western Pacific*.

