

71st Session of the WHO Regional Committee for Africa

Author: Uniting to Combat Neglected Tropical Diseases (UNITING)

Agenda item: 18.3, Progress report on the Regional strategy and Strategic plan for Neglected Tropical Diseases in the African Region 2014–2020

Statement:

Uniting to Combat Neglected Tropical Diseases (NTDs), a global collective of dedicated partners working together to defeat 20 neglected tropical diseases, welcomes the progress report on the regional strategy and strategic plan for NTDs in the African Region 2014-2020. We commend the progress that has been made over the period including:

- Ghana and Kenya being certified free of Guinea worm disease, with the Democratic Republic of Congo and Sudan on the verge of joining them
- Togo and Cote D'Ivoire eliminating sleeping sickness, with Benin, Equatorial Guinea, Uganda, Ghana, Rwanda on the verge of elimination
- Leprosy elimination, achieved and sustained in all countries except the Comoros.
- The Gambia eliminating trachoma to become the 15th country in the AFRO region to eliminate at least one NTD

We welcome the next steps outlined in the report to accelerate progress towards eradication, elimination and control of NTDs in the WHO African Region, and to address the disruption caused by COVID-19. If we are to meet the targets set out in the Sustainable Development Goals and the WHO NTD roadmap, continued leadership is needed by countries to fully restore and further accelerate NTD interventions, demonstrated by the integration of NTD interventions in the essential package of health care and the allocation of domestic resources.

We note the significant impact of the UK government's recent decision to completely exit from supporting NTD programmes, including programmes that supported 24 countries in the AFRO region. COVID-19 has shown how highly connected the world is, how diseases do not respect borders and why disease control can only be dealt with through global coordinated action. As such, we have appealed to the UK to remain a committed partner in working with countries in fighting these diseases of poverty. The eradication and elimination of NTDs must be recognised as a global public good whose benefits are of universal reach. We further recommend a formal, collective response by the 24 countries affected by the UK government exit from NTDs and request the Chair of the incoming Regional Committee Meeting to support the countries in the formal response.

In further support of NTD interventions and the recently endorsed WHO NTD roadmap, Uniting to Combat NTDs plans to launch the Kigali Declaration on NTDs, a high-level political declaration sponsored by the Government of Rwanda. With a focus on endemic country leadership and multi-sectoral collaboration, the Kigali Declaration will deliver the political, operational and financial commitments required to end NTDs once and for all. We ask that the Regional Committee promote this declaration among its members and support the action needed to deliver the WHO roadmap.

NTDs are preventable or treatable so it is within our power to end these diseases. Polio has been kicked out of Africa, now let's kick NTDs out!