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WHO Member States in the Eastern Mediterranean Region (EMR) have made significant progress in implementing the first neglected diseases (NTD) roadmap 2012–2020 (1). For example, 42.7 million fewer people required interventions against NTDs in 2019 than in 2012 (2,3), two countries have eliminated lymphatic filariasis (4), and three countries have eliminated trachoma (5). Nevertheless, some countries remain highly affected by NTDs, incidence of cutaneous leishmaniasis continues to increase, and there has been a resurgence of visceral leishmaniasis.

In February 2021, following the 18th meeting held in December 2020 (6), the WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean (WHO/EMRO) convened the 19th meeting (7) of the Regional Programme Review Group on elimination of NTDs under preventive chemotherapy programmes and the national NTD programme managers, to review country-specific and regional progress in implementing the 2012–2020 roadmap and discuss the draft 2021–2025 regional framework (8) and the development of country-specific plans to achieve NTD control targets for the next 3–5-years.

Discussion

WHO/EMRO staff delivered presentations on progress at the regional level in implementing the 2012–2020 roadmap; presented the new NTD control roadmap 2021–2030 (9) and the draft regional NTD control/elimination framework for 2021–2025 (8). Representatives of partner organizations presented their contributions and plans to combat NTDs in the region, and representatives of Member States presented progress and challenges in 2020 and priority

activities for 2021. The presentations were discussed and actions on the way forward were recommended.

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected NTD mitigation activities in all countries during 2020. Only Egypt and Yemen conducted mass drug administration or any other community-based interventions during 2020. Member States, however, used innovative strategies to minimize the impact of the pandemic on NTDs management, such as providing anti-leprosy medicines for three months, integrating active case finding and treatment with other disease control programmes, and scaling-up thermotherapy for the management of cutaneous leishmaniasis instead of systemic treatment with antimonials.

Recommendations

Country-specific recommendations from the meeting aim to address challenges identified during the presentations and discussions.

For EMR Member States

The following recommendations are planned to be implemented in collaboration with partners:

Adopting innovative logistics and resource mobilization methods, such as pooled funding and pooled procurement and allocation of specific budget line for NTDs in the health care budget, to increase access to quality-assured diagnostics and medicines,

continuous programme monitoring, evaluation and reporting, including evaluation of epidemiological impact, to enhance programme adaptation,

supporting behavioural change communication via national and subnational advocacy campaigns and outreach to improve programme coverage and compliance, thus further reducing prevalence,

adapting programme to local situation, including development of national action plans and guidelines for diseases endemic in each country and use of single-dose rifampicin prophylaxis for leprosy,

integrating vector management, clinical management and surveillance to enhance control efforts (for example, integrating skin NTD strategy for leprosy, mycetoma, scabies, and other fungal and parasitic diseases),

conducting prevalence and baseline surveys to estimate the burden of NTDs, provide evidence for interventions, and identify the most cost-effective control methods,

strengthening the capacity of physicians and other healthcare workers to strengthen diagnosis, surveillance and case detection, case management, and supply chain management, and

establishing multisectoral coordination mechanisms for NTDs.

For WHO

WHO/EMRO is recommended to provide technical support to Member States for the development of their national strategic plans; timely and objective reporting; capacity-building in disease management, surveillance, mapping, and research; and for conducting annual progress review meetings.

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