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WHO event addressing public health priorities

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Introduction

Neglected tropical diseases (NTDs) are a diverse group of 20 diseases caused by viruses, bacteria, parasites, fungi, and toxins (1–3). They are preventable and treatable, yet they affect more than 1.6 billion people globally (4,5). These diseases have devastating health, social and economic consequences, especially in the tropical low- and middle-income countries (3).

All 22 countries and territories in the Eastern Mediterranean Region (EMR) are affected by at least one NTD and only 7 of the countries have eliminated at least one (1). Among the NTDs, EMR accounts for 80% of reported cutaneous leishmaniasis cases and 44% of reported visceral leishmaniasis (6). Leishmaniasis and soil-transmitted helminthiases are responsible for nearly half of the disability-adjusted life years in the region.

Substantial progress has been made in WHO-led efforts to eliminate NTDs globally and in the EMR, however, a lot still needs to be done (1,3). Efforts to control NTDs are very important in achieving Universal Health Coverage and the Sustainable Development Goal target 3.8 (7).

In September 2023, the WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean (WHO/EMRO) convened the 21st meeting of the Regional Programme Review Group on NTDs and the national NTD programme managers to review progress on the control of NTDs in the region, discuss and recommend actions for Member States, and develop country plans for 2024.

Summary of discussions

Several challenges have hindered progress in the control of NTDs in the EMR in recent years. These include the disruptions caused by COVID-19 pandemic; changes in funding priorities; gaps in knowledge; limited programme-ready diagnostics, medicines and vaccines; limitations in vector control and behaviour change interventions; and conflicts in some countries and territories of the region (1,3,7).

The 6 strategic priorities to combat NTDs globally include increasing advocacy and visibility for NTDs; strengthening the global NTD programme; leveraging partnerships within and outside affected communities; costing of implementation plans for the delivery of roadmap targets; expanding the donor base to secure sustainable funding; and strong programme leadership by WHO. In the EMR, WHO, Member States and partners will work together to mobilize political support, resources and community engagement for NTD interventions; integrate NTD interventions in well-resourced disease control programmes; and strengthen monitoring and evaluation of NTD programmes.

Key recommendations

Participants recommended the following actions for Member States and WHO:

Recommendations for Member States

1. Conduct behaviour change communication interventions in collaboration with partners, to increase awareness in the community about NTDs and their preventive and mitigation measures, support the reduction of risky behaviours and improve treatment compliance.
2. Improve screening, diagnosis, surveillance and case management for NTDs through training for healthcare workers, programme integration and implementation of national action plans and guidelines.
3. Strengthen intersectoral collaborations and partnerships for the control of vectors, reservoirs and other risk factors.
4. Conduct prevalence and impact assessment surveys to provide evidence for policy and actions.
5. Scale-up control efforts at the primary health care level especially in endemic areas to accelerate case management.

Recommendations for WHO

1. Provide technical support and capacity-building to Member States to conduct NTD programme reviews, develop or review NTD strategic and operational plans, and improve surveillance and case management.
2. Support Member States to develop and submit country dossiers for eradication or elimination of NTDs.
3. Assist Member States in identifying NTD research priorities and conducting relevant surveys.
4. Support advocacy for political commitment and increased foreign and domestic funding for NTDs.
5. Support annual progress reviews by Member States.

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