



WAHO Press Release on the Occasion of the World Neglected Tropical Diseases (NTD) Day

Bobo-Dioulasso, 30 January 2023: the West African Health Organization (WAHO) joins the international community in celebrating the fourth World Day of Neglected Tropical Diseases (NTDs) under the theme "Act now. Act together. Invest in neglected tropical diseases". This is an opportunity for us to renew our commitment to ending the suffering caused by NTDs.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), about 1.7 billion people suffer from NTDs, or 1 in 5 people worldwide! Forty-nine African countries bear 40% of the global burden. NTDs, not only disproportionately affect the poorest and marginalized, but can also trap and lock households in poverty. Besides the illnesses they cause, the debilitating deformities and disabilities from NTDs are often associated with stigma and discrimination, with adverse socio-economic consequences. Women and girls are disproportionately affected, owing to their gender roles and responsibilities, lower financial autonomy (which limits their access to health care) and their experience of a greater impact of stigma and discrimination. Women also suffer from genital schistosomiasis, a disease that is frequently misdiagnosed or underestimated.

ECOWAS countries are endemic for at least one of the 20 NTDs identified by the WHO. The commonest NTDs include blinding trachoma, Buruli ulcer, Guinea worm disease, human African trypanosomiasis, leprosy, lymphatic filariasis, onchocerciasis, rabies, schistosomiasis, soil-transmitted helminthiasis, and yaws. WHO estimates that about 55% of 239 million individuals in the ECOWAS region received treatment for at least one of the five main chemopreventive NTDs in 2020.

While remarkable progress has been achieved, significant challenges remain. These include the scale up of actionable programmes and funded interventions, limited financing, poor access to prevention and care, weak health systems, weak surveillance, limited integration, multisector action and research. There is a threat of insecticide-resistance to vector-borne NTDs while there is little information on other NTDs such as scabies and snake bites.

WAHO, therefore, welcomes the political commitment to the elimination of NTDs. African leaders have agreed a common African position and a continental framework for the control and elimination of NTDs by 2030. Two ECOWAS countries are among the twelve endemic countries that have so far endorsed the Kigali Declaration on NTDs which was launched in June 2022 and has successfully mobilised more than \$1.6 billion for NTDs and over 19 billion tablets towards the control, elimination and eradication of NTDs by 2030.

In November 2021, ECOWAS Health Ministers in Abuja for Member States agreed to take the necessary measures to scale up surveillance, partnerships, multisectoral response, integrated approaches, community engagement to improve service quality and coverage in NTD control, elimination and eradication; to increase priority to NTDs in the national development and



Bobo-Dioulasso, Burkina Faso, January 30, 2023

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public health agenda with increased domestic funding; and to reduce NTD-related inequalities.

WAHO commends the nine ECOWAS countries out of the 47 global and 19 African countries which have eliminated, at least, one NTD in the context of political instability and major health security risks. The most successful country, Togo, has been validated as having eliminated four NTDs – Guinea worm disease, blinding trachoma, lymphatic filariasis (elephantiasis) and human African trypanosomiasis (HAT; sleeping sickness). Ghana was certified last week as having eliminated sleeping sickness. ECOWAS countries have also submitted dossiers to be certified for various NTDs. These successes translate into improved quality of lives from reduced NTD-related health care costs, restored dignity to affected persons and their families, improved school attendance and higher household productivity. They remind us of the evidence that investment in NTDs is a best-buy with healthy returns.

Within the framework of the WHO Roadmap on NTDs 2021-2030, the African Continental Framework on Elimination of NTDs, the ECOWAS Vision 2050, the ECOWAS One Health Strategy and the Accra Declaration of Universal Health Coverage of 2022, WAHO is committed to working with ECOWAS Member States, Development Partners and NGOs to control, eliminate and eradicate NTDs. With financial support from the African Development Bank and the KfW Bank of the Federal Republic of Germany, WAHO, in separate projects this year, will provide support to improve access to prevention, quality and affordable care for NTDs in cross-border districts, strengthen integration, cross-border collaboration and community engagements as well as build research capacity in NTDs. WAHO will continue to coordinate the multisectoral response in the region.

On the occasion of the World NTD Day, WAHO thanks Member States, all major stakeholders, collaborators and the donor community for the several initiatives to eliminate NTDs. We have to “Act now. Act together. Invest in neglected tropical diseases” to improve the quality of lives, leaving no-one behind.