 Programme Managers’ Meeting for the Elimination of Visceral Leishmaniasis in Eastern Africa

Addis Ababa, Ethiopia
11–13 June 2024

**Background:** In 2010, around 2.19 billion people required intervention against neglected tropical diseases. To boost global efforts in the prevention, control, elimination and eradication of NTDs, WHO published the first NTD roadmap 2012-2020, aiming to accelerate work to overcome the global impact of NTDs. During the period 2010-2020, these initiatives resulted in a 20% decrease in the number of people requiring interventions against neglected tropical diseases (NTDs), which directly contributes to the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG indicator 3.3.5). However, this progress is not uniform across NTDs and regions. To further consolidate and progress, in 2021, WHO launched the NTD roadmap 2021-2030 with ambitious goals and targets.

The roadmap is a consensus document of countries, partners, and WHO which offers opportunities to overcome challenges that have remained unaddressed. One such area is the elimination of visceral leishmaniasis (VL) at the global and regional levels.

Leishmaniasis is classified as one of the most neglected tropical diseases and has strong links with poverty and together they create a mutual vicious cycle. It is one of the infectious vector-borne diseases of poverty disproportionally affecting low and lower-middle-income countries typically afflicting their poorest and most isolated populations. The diseases are generally associated with malnutrition, displacement, poor housing, illiteracy, gender discrimination, weakness of the immune system, and lack of resources. They are also linked to environmental changes, such as deforestation, the building of dams, new irrigation schemes and urbanization, and the accompanying migration of non-immune people to endemic areas.

All forms of leishmaniases remain a major global public health problem with an estimated 700 000 to 1 million new cases annually. Around 1 billion population remain at risk of this protozoal infection.

Among all forms, visceral leishmaniasis (VL) is a deadly disease if left untreated and remains one of the top parasitic diseases which has an outbreak and high mortality potential. It is endemic in all WHO regions affecting 80 countries with more than 350 million population at risk of acquiring infection. An estimated 50 000 to 90 000 new cases occur annually with only 25 to 45% reported to WHO. In 2022, more than 90% of new cases reported to WHO occurred in 13 countries; Brazil, China, Eritrea, Ethiopia, India, Iraq, Kenya, Nepal, South Sudan, Somalia, Sudan, Yemen, and Uganda.

**Launching meeting of strategic framework for VL elimination in Eastern Africa**- In 2019, the Eastern African epidemiological sub-region surpassed other geographies becoming the highest disease burden visceral leishmaniasis focus in the world, while it’s South Asian counterpart experienced a more than 90% decline in VL incidence from the baseline of 2005. The significant decline in VL burden in South Asia
has been attributed to the unique epidemiology of VL, enabling the launch of the regional elimination initiative as well as political commitment, country ownership, and donor and partner support. Currently (2022), 9 countries i.e., Chad, Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, and Uganda, shared more than 50% of the global VL burden.

In 2021, WHO NTD Department in collaboration with the Special Programme for Research and Training in Tropical Disease (TDR) of WHO initiated a multi-stakeholder consultation to explore prospects of VL elimination in Eastern Africa drawing from the applicable lessons from the South Asian elimination initiative. In this process, more than 30 stakeholders were interviewed from 9 countries in Eastern Africa and South Asia ranging from country programme managers, researchers, academia, donors, international and national nongovernmental organizations, as well as the three levels of WHO and implementation partners (manuscript under preparation for scientific publication).

The outcome of this assessment resulted in expression in unison among all stakeholders to launch a similar elimination initiative for eastern African countries. This was further endorsed by the national programmes and partners during the VL review meeting of national programme managers of Central and East Africa and South Asia, 14-17 June 2022, organized by the WHO. During the meeting WHO was requested to lead and facilitate this process.

Following above recommendations, WHO in collaboration with the END Fund and Drugs for Neglected Disease Initiative (DNDi) organized a historical meeting on 24-27 January 2023 to deliberate on the development of a strategic framework for visceral leishmaniasis elimination in Eastern Africa. The meeting resulted in

- Strategic framework for VL elimination in Eastern Africa,
- The Nairobi Declaration, and,
- The Nairobi meeting report

The strategic framework for VL elimination is under publication and the NTD Department is planning to launch the framework with programme managers and stakeholders from 9 Eastern African countries, Chad, Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan and Uganda in a meeting 11-13 June 2024, at Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

The objectives of the meeting are to (towards WHO’s Global Programme of Work (GPW) Output 1.1.2 - countries enabled to strengthen their health systems to deliver on condition-and disease-specific service coverage results)

- Launching of the strategic framework for the elimination of visceral leishmaniasis in eastern Africa, 2023-2030 & review the current epidemiological situation at global, regional and country level;
- Review the planning/preparatory phase for VL elimination initiative;
- Deliberate on cross-border collaboration, and,
- Present forecasting tool for health product procurement
This meeting is organized by the World Health Organization in collaboration with Drugs for Neglected Diseases Initiative (DNDi).