

**Sustaining Gains, Expanding Horizons – From A 20-Year Journey of Regional Kala-azar Elimination
Commitment and Innovation Toward a Healthier South-East Asia through Multi-Disease Elimination (MDE)**

Building on the legacy of kala-azar elimination for integrated public health delivery

Background

Historically, the Indian subcontinent - including Bangladesh, India, and Nepal - accounted for nearly 70% of the global kala-azar (visceral leishmaniasis) burden. Between 2004 and 2008, these countries reported an average of 42,000 cases annually. In response, WHO-SEARO established the Regional Technical Advisory Group (RTAG) in 2004 and facilitated the launch of the Regional Kala-azar Elimination Initiative in 2005, **exactly 20 years ago from today**, through a memorandum of understanding (MoU) signed by Bangladesh, India, and Nepal, which was later joined by Bhutan and Thailand in 2014.

Since the MoU's inception, national efforts - guided by RTAG, strategic frameworks, and supported by donors, research institutions, and implementation partners - have progressively enhanced systems for active and passive case detection, diagnostics, treatment, vector surveillance, and control. This success was enabled by:

- **High-level political commitment** and sustained allocation of dedicated resources;
- **Cross-border collaboration for research and innovation**, enabling rapid translation of R&D and findings into effective policies, programmatic tools and practices; and
- **Timely donor support**, ensuring access to essential diagnostics, medicines, and public health interventions.

As a result, Bangladesh was validated as the first country in the world to eliminate kala-azar as a public health problem in 2023, with India and Nepal also having achieved elimination targets by the end of 2023 and 2024, respectively. These achievements underscore the power of coordinated regional cross-border efforts, sustained political will, and evidence-based strategies and offer valuable lessons for addressing other communicable diseases.

Emerging Challenges and Opportunities

However, with the success of kala-azar elimination, new challenges and opportunities have emerged. Sustaining gains in low-incidence settings requires continuous vigilance - through strong surveillance, timely response, and continuous awareness among health workers and communities. Maintaining diagnostic and case management capacity across health facilities is also essential. Integrated approaches that address other vector-borne and communicable diseases are key to maintaining efficiency and resilience. Additionally, long-term success depends on tackling social and environmental determinants of health, including housing, sanitation, and the impacts of climate change.

Indeed, eliminating any communicable diseases requires equitable access to high-quality public health interventions and healthcare services. Many of these services - such as surveillance, health education, and vector control - are common across multiple diseases. Therefore, integrating their delivery enhances

cost-effectiveness, operational efficiency, and community acceptance, while also elevating political visibility and commitment.

Effective delivery of integrated services also depends on robust health systems, including reliable health information systems, adequate health financing, a skilled health workforce, efficient medical supply chains, and strong regulatory frameworks.

Additionally, many communicable diseases share common underlying risk factors - such as poverty, undernutrition, immunosuppressive conditions, poor hygiene and sanitation, and limited health literacy. Addressing these determinants is essential to both achieving and sustaining disease elimination.

To further accelerate our progress and ensure achievements of the critical low-hanging disease elimination goals, WHO-SEARO proposes a **People-Centered Multi-Disease Elimination (MDE) Initiative** as a new strategic framework that integrates service delivery, strengthens health systems, and addresses social determinants of health through multi-sectoral collaboration **without diluting disease-specific focus**. Prioritizing MDE in the South-East Asia Region would contribute to building a healthier, more resilient population, while empowering communities and enhancing regional stability and economic development.

Objectives of the Side Event

- To highlight achievements, success factors and lessons learnt in the Regional Kala-azar Elimination Initiative, including the enabling role of cross-border collaboration on the occasion 20th year anniversary of the Regional Kala-azar Elimination MOU.
- To introduce the People-Centered Multi-Disease Elimination (MDE) approach, its relevance to the South-East Asia Region.
- To identify opportunities for integrated and cost-effective public health delivery and discuss the role of governance, multi-sectoral action, and health system strengthening in sustaining elimination gains.
- To catalyze political commitment and consensus and partners support for a Regional Multi-Disease Elimination Initiative.

Proposed agenda (90 minutes)

Time	Agenda item
18:00 – 18:05 (5 min)	Opening remarks – WHO-SEARO Leadership
18:05 – 18:11 (6 min)	Address by host countries (India, Nepal)
18:11 – 18:16 (5 min)	Video: Road to elimination of KA in South-East Asia
18:16 – 18:23 (7 min)	Keynote Address 1: Journey towards the India sub-continent free from kala-azar – the power of regional partnership, lessons learnt and the way forward (Prof Nirmal Kumar Ganguly)
18:23 – 18:43 (20 min)	Panel Discussion Part 1: Success factors, lessons learnt and the way forward to accelerate and sustain elimination of kala-azar in South-East Asia <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Country representatives (India, Bangladesh, Nepal)- DNDi- MSF

18:43 – 18:51 (8 min)	Keynote Address 2: Regional Multi-Disease Elimination (MDE) Initiative – Opportunities, challenges and the way forward (Dr Suman Rijal, WHO-SEARO)
18:51 – 19:11 (20 min)	Panel Discussion Part 2: Accelerating and sustaining elimination of kala-azar through multi-disease elimination approach in South-East Asia <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Country representatives (Bhutan, Sri Lanka, Thailand) - Gates Foundation - PATH
19:11 – 19:26 (15 min)	Open Floor / Q&A
19:26 – 19:30 (4 min)	Concluding Remarks by host country (India)

Expected outcomes

- Celebration of the 20th year anniversary of the Regional Kala-azar Elimination MOU and recognition of its success in accelerating Kala-azar elimination in the Region
- Increased awareness and commitment to the Multi-Disease Elimination (MDE) approach among Member States and partners in the WHO South-East Asia Region