

## Policy Position – Neglected Tropical Diseases (NTDs)

November 2022

For more than 100 years, the Royal Society of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene (RSTMH) has adapted to the changing face of tropical medicine and global health. As our world becomes more interconnected and interdependent, we must consider a wider approach to improving health through multiple disciplines and sectors. Using the Sustainable Development Goals as our context, we recognise the importance of our links with animal and wider planetary health, and the underlying social, structural, political, economic and environmental factors that determine health around the globe.

This policy position outlines the Royal Society of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene's stance on the issue of **neglected tropical diseases** and shares the Society's influencing priorities to inform research, policy and the generation of evidence to improve programmes, guided by the Society's 2017 – 2022 strategy.

### Background

Neglected tropical diseases (NTDs) are 20 diseases and disease groups that affect over 1 billion people around the world and occur under tropical and sub-tropical climate conditions<sup>1</sup>. They are intimately linked to poverty and thrive in areas where access to adequate sanitation, clean water and healthcare is limited, where people live in proximity with animals and infective disease vectors, such as in remote and rural areas, informal settlements or conflict zones<sup>2</sup>. While global attention tends to focus on killer diseases, NTDs collectively disable and disfigure many more people than they kill, and ultimately affected people live long years with disability and stigma, keep children out of school, affect the economic potential of adults, burden households with considerable costs to seek health care, trap communities in endless cycles of poverty and cost developing economies billions of dollars every year.<sup>3,4</sup>

Since 2012 significant progress across NTDs has been achieved with 34 countries having achieved the elimination of at least one NTD<sup>5</sup>. This success can be attributed to the combination of the 2012 - 2020 WHO NTD road map with clear targets and game-changing partner commitments endorsed in the 2012 London Declaration on Neglected Tropical Diseases, which led to unprecedented progress in the implementation of large-scale preventive treatment, case management and care of NTDs. The coming decade to 2030 will see as challenges the mainstreaming of these NTD interventions into universal health coverage and the coordination with other major health concerns and sectors to get to the roots of poverty, and scale up access to both preventative and disease management interventions through a holistic approach to improve human health and well-being.

***Opportunities laid out by a new WHO Global NTD Road Map, 2021 – 2030:*** [\*Ending the neglect to attain the Sustainable Development Goals: a road map for neglected tropical diseases 2021–2030\*](#) sets out global targets and milestones to prevent, control, eliminate and eradicate 20 NTDs and disease groups. The road map will align and re-focus the work of countries, partners and stakeholders during the next decade, including cross-cutting targets aligned with the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals by shifting away from single-disease vertical programmes to integrated approaches; promoting improved coordination and collaboration; and driving greater national and local government led decision making, with a clear emphasis on the inclusion of affected communities in the consultation, design and implementation of programmes.

This new road map will advance the NTD agenda with opportunities to stimulate efforts through comprehensive approaches that require multisectoral collaboration, to address the underlying causes of poverty and inequity. It also presents opportunities to address and strengthen overlapping areas of interest that impact on NTDs such as access to water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) and co-morbidities including non-communicable diseases (NCDs), mental health, disability prevention and inclusion and the impact of built environments that affect the transmission and delivery of interventions to address these diseases.

**NTDs are major drivers of mental ill-health in affected people**, their families and their caregivers. Because of chronic pain, discomfort, reduced functioning, and stigma, people with NTDs are at high risk for mental health conditions, and they often cite mental health as a priority<sup>6</sup>. For some people, distress can lead to more severe mental, neurological and social problems. The 2021 – 2030 WHO NTD road map also recognises that the number of

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NTD-related DALYs would be significantly higher if issues such as stigmatization, mental health (e.g., anxiety and depression) and co-morbidity were considered. As a result, the new road map places emphasis on the need to address co-morbidity with mental health consideration to ensure affected people and communities receive the support they need to manage health outcomes including life-long disabilities, due to NTDs.

**Non-communicable diseases (NCDs)** represent the leading cause of death worldwide, killing 41 million people each year—equivalent to 71% of all deaths globally, including cardiovascular diseases, cancers, respiratory diseases and diabetes. The 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) holds at its core a focus on equity (leaving no one behind) and recognises NCDs as a major challenge for sustainable development. The link between NCDs and NTDs is emerging as a new area for scientific enquiry. The early diagnosis of NTDs may also have a dual advantage over late diagnosis and management of some NCDs, for example when considering the links between cardiovascular disease and Chagas disease and an increased risk of diabetes in women<sup>7</sup>; chronic infection of schistosomiasis as a risk factor for bladder cancer<sup>8</sup>; increased prevalence of diabetes in people with leprosy<sup>9</sup>. These three examples highlight the crucial influence of transmission due to inadequate sanitation, lack of access to clean water and poor housing.

NTDs can therefore serve as a portal of entry for NCD screening and management given that many NCDs are commonly prevalent among people with NTDs and are routinely diagnosed at primary health care level. NCDs are manifested in the cases of NTDs at the later stage of its prognosis, this may not be directly due to NTDs itself, but due to late outcomes of the diseases or the complications arising due to late health seeking behaviour.

### **RSTMH position**

NTDs concern the most neglected and poorest populations affecting over 1 billion people worldwide. While significant progress across NTDs has been achieved over the last two decades, limited financial resources, inadequate capacity to implement effective surveillance, disruptive conflicts and barriers to accessing needed health services that range from poverty, stigmatization and mental health continue to be huge challenges to overcome. Strengthening health systems, cross-sectoral collaboration, community ownership of disease surveillance and programs, operational research to developed evidence-based interventions and strategies and research for new tools will all be required to combat the current and future challenges of NTDs.

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted deep inequalities and inequity in accessing health interventions. At a time when the economic landscape is changing impacted by COVID-19 and a global recession, the opportunity to develop innovative approaches through a One Health and wider Planetary Health approach provides us with a strong framework for collaboration and integration. From promoting climate change adaptation and sustainability, to averting conflict within and between nations, to confronting the systemic forces that create unequal societies. The COVID-19 pandemic has clearly demonstrated the need for resilient and sustainable health systems that can weather health crises to support public health.

RSTMH also acknowledges that the psychosocial and neurological effects of certain NTDs cannot be managed without well-functioning mental health and social support structures. Research and evidence-based interventions must be included in NTD programmes aimed at reducing stigmatization and breaking down barriers to timely access to care and treatment for individuals, families, communities and marginalized groups.

Combined with the rise in NCDs in almost all countries of varying economic status, vulnerable and marginalised populations continue to bear the brunt of major health challenges due to widening social and health inequity. New scientific enquiry into the links between NTDs and NCDs enables RSTMH and its members to add value to global discourse and generate evidence to further inform policy at a national, regional and global level to promote the adoption of multi-disciplinary and cross-sectoral collaborations that reach across NTDs and comorbidities with NCDs, emerging infectious diseases and the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals agenda.

To support the implementation and goals of the 2021 – 2030 WHO NTD Global road map, RSTMH will address major challenges for NTDs across: (i) mainstreaming the One Health and wider Planetary Health approach to forge

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collaborations that tackle NTDs in the broader context of our shared planet, as well as addressing the underlying causes of poverty to reach the 2030 SDGs (ii) facilitate coordination between research and programme communities working across NTDs, WASH, nutrition, mental health, NCDs and other sectors to generate evidence to scale up access to effective interventions and health services (iii) support national, regional and global advocacy efforts and resource mobilisation to support health systems to solicit cross-sectoral action — for basic water supply, adequate sanitary infrastructure and improved housing, for an integrated vector control response, for the coordination of interventions with agriculture and livestock management — to sustain achievements and alleviate the underlying socio-economic determinants of NTDs.

### Influencing priorities

1. Advocate the use of One Health and wider Planetary Health as a framework to deliver cross-sectoral collaborations that support research, knowledge gaps and offer cross-sectoral innovations that tackle integration with WASH, NCDs, mental health and disability inclusion.
2. Promote research questions and further studies on WASH, mental health, NCD and NTD comorbidities to design innovative approaches to tackling global health challenges; support the provision of reliable epidemiological estimates of mental health and NCDs and their drivers to appropriately inform prevention and control strategies.
3. Utilise evidence from research and practical guidelines for evidence-based interventions, advocate for the inclusion of mental health in comprehensive, person-centred services and universal health coverage.
4. Support resource mobilisation at national, regional and global levels across R&D, operational research and implementation to curb the burden of comorbidities with NTDs.

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