OBAMA-BIDEN TRANSITION PROJECT

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BILL & MELINDA GATES foundation

Neglected Tropical Diseases

So-called neglected tropical diseases (NTDs)[1] are virtually unheard of in the U.S., yet take a terrible toll in the poorest countries. Broad engagement of public and private partners in the U.S. has demonstrated that these diseases can be successfully controlled and eliminated with relatively modest investment. The next administration and Congress have an opportunity to build on this progress.

The fight against neglected tropical diseases has benefitted from the unique contributions of both the public and private sectors, and not-for-profit development organizations:

- The Mectizan Donation Program is the single largest, longest standing drug donation program of its kind. It was founded in 1987 when the pharmaceutical company Merck & Co. committed to donate the drug needed to combat onchocerciasis (river blindness) for all who need it for as long as they need it. Since that time, the Program has expanded its work and partnered with a second major pharmaceutical company, GlaxoSmithKline.
- In September 2006, USAID funded the first global effort to support an integrated NTD control program, focusing initially on five countries in Africa - Burkina Faso, Ghana, Mali, Niger, and Uganda. In its first year of implementation, this program delivered more than 35 million NTD treatments to more than 14 million people. [1]
- A number of US-based organizations are recognized as leaders in the global health community for their work on NTDs, including the Carter Center which collaborates with numerous governmental and nongovernmental agencies to implement control and elimination programs for five NTDs in countries throughout Africa and the Americas.

The world has made great strides against NTDs, demonstrating that these diseases can be controlled and eliminated with relatively modest investment:

- Guinea worm is on track for global eradication by 2009; since 1986, the number of cases worldwide have been reduced by more than 99.7%.
- Lymphatic filariasis (a parasitic disease caused by thread-like worms) is the target of a rapidly expanding control program. During 2005, 321 million people received drugs to protect them from infection. This figure represents tremendous expansion since 2000, when 25 million people received drugs. The disease has been virtually pushed out of Costa Rica, the Solomon Islands, Suriname, and Trinidad and Tobago.[2]

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[1] While a comprehensive list of NTDs does not exist, attention and efforts have largely been focused on seven diseases: Ascariasis; Hookworm infection; Trichuriasis; Lymphatic filariasis; Onchocerciasis; Schistosomiasis; and Trachoma.

[2] http://www.who.int/neglected_diseases/faq/en/index7.html

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- The estimated number of people affected by trachoma (an eye infection that can result in blindness) has fallen from 360 million people in 1985 to approximately 80 million people in 2006.[3]
- Onchocerciasis, which also causes blindness, is no longer a public health problem in large parts of West Africa – previously the most severely affected area. In that region, at least 600,000 cases of blindness have been prevented.[4]

The next administration and Congress can help rally the world for increased partnership and action on neglected tropical diseases by:

- **Increasing US resources for NTDs to $350 million over the next five years**. With such an investment, the number of focus countries receiving support to control and combat NTDS would increase from 10 to approximately 30, and integrated treatment would be provided to more than 300 million people in Africa, Asia, and Latin America.
- **Encouraging international partners to join a campaign to fight NTDs, and collectively mobilize $2 billion over the next five years.** One billion people still suffer from at least one NTD, and many are co-infected. Integrated approaches offer a cost-effective way of tackling several diseases at once. The U.S. and our partners should encourage integrated treatment programs in high-burden areas such as Sub-Saharan Africa and some countries in Asia and Latin America.
- **Recognizing the invaluable contributions of the private sector, and encouraging pharmaceutical companies to maintain and expand NTD drug donation programs.** Most drugs needed to treat NTDs are donated by the pharmaceutical industry. These donations are valued at hundreds of millions of dollars each year, and reduce the estimated cost for other program components to less than 40 cents per person per year in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Frequently Asked Questions

Why are these diseases referred to as "neglected" diseases?

Neglected diseases are not highly visible and do not cause outbreaks that attract public and media attention. Because they tend to affect poor people in tropical regions, they do not attract the level of investment in treatment and prevention as diseases that affect wealthier populations in developed countries. Affected people live almost exclusively in remote rural areas and shantytowns where access to health care is limited.

Why should the U.S. invest in controlling NTDs?

One billion of the world's poorest citizens are infected with an NTD. Many are simultaneously infected with two or more. Unlike many other diseases, there are cheap and effective prevention and treatment options that can be delivered today to improve health and the quality of millions of people's lives. In addition to overlap in infections, these diseases share similar intervention strategies, and seven NTDs can be controlled or even eliminated through targeted mass drug administration at a cost of approximately 50 cents per person per year. Treating those who suffer from NTDs will bolster child development, promote educational achievement, and contribute to reductions in poverty, morbidity and mortality.

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[3] http://www.who.int/mediacentre/news/notes/2006/np09/en/index.html

[4] http://www.who.int/neglected_diseases/faq/en/index7.html

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Aren't these diseases much smaller priorities than the major killers, like HIV/AIDS and malaria? Why should we spend money and effort on these issues when so much remains to be done on the other global health challenges?

While the effect of each individual disease looks small compared to HIV, TB, and malaria, the cumulative disease burden is quite high. Roughly 1 in 6 people worldwide suffer from one or more of the NTDs. Given that integrated investments can tackle several diseases at once and that we have the tools necessary to get the job done, a relatively modest global investment can have a huge impact on the lives of those in the developing world who suffer from these diseases every day.

To learn more, see:

- World Health Organization NTD Control Site: http://www.who.int/neglected_diseases/en/
- U.S. Initiative to Combat NTDs: http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2008/02/20080220.html

[1] http://www.usaid.gov/press/factsheets/2008/fs080222.html