

## A call for collective action: Imperative of eliminating NTDs in Africa

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Sika Kabore , Isatou Touray



*Editor's note: Decision Makers is a global platform for decision makers to share their insights on events shaping today's world. Sika Kabore is former First Lady of Burkina Faso and Head of the KIMI Foundation; and Isatou Touray is former Vice President of the Republic of the Gambia. The article reflects the authors' opinions and not necessarily the views of CGTN.*

Across the African continent, a global health revolution is underway. For the past two decades, nations like Burkina Faso and The Gambia have been making historic progress in the fight against neglected tropical diseases (NTDs). To date, 21 countries in Africa have eliminated at least one NTD, with several countries such as Togo, Benin, and Malawi having eliminated two, three or four NTDs. Their success stories are not just regional triumphs; they are powerful testaments to the potential of collective action against diseases that have plagued humanity for centuries.

Yet, amid the celebration of these achievements, a stark reality looms large. The progress we've made against NTDs is precariously balanced on the edge of a shifting global landscape. Global conflicts, economic instability, and climate change threaten to undo the gains we've worked so hard to achieve. As the world grapples with these challenges, the need for increased funding and renewed political commitment has never been more critical.

The upcoming 2023 Reaching the Last Mile (RLM) Forum, held under the patronage of His Highness Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, President of the UAE, and in partnership with the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, on December 3, will serve as a pivotal platform

for the global community to further galvanize partnerships and resources towards eliminating these diseases.

### **Progress in Burkina Faso and The Gambia**

NTDs are a group of 20 infectious diseases that can debilitate, disfigure, and be fatal. The burden of NTDs is immense, affecting around 1.65 billion people worldwide and causing substantial economic losses in affected regions due to healthcare costs and decreased productivity.

Burkina Faso and The Gambia stand as powerful examples of the transformative impact achievable through a comprehensive approach to combating NTDs. Burkina Faso, affected by 12 NTDs including sleeping sickness and river blindness, achieved an extraordinary reduction in NTD risk from 19.2 million people in 2012 to 3.7 million in 2021, marking an impressive 81 percent decrease. The country's relentless efforts led to the elimination of Guinea worm disease in 2011 and a significant decrease in the prevalence of intestinal worms (soil-transmitted helminths) to less than 2 percent. Burkina Faso also consistently scored above 88 in the NTD Coverage Index between 2016 and 2020, according to the WHO Global Health Observatory 2023, showcasing their dedicated efforts.



A female doctor takes care of a patient in hospital. /CFP

Meanwhile, The Gambia, facing challenges such as intestinal worms and Bilharzia (schistosomiasis), reduced its at-risk population from 1.2 million in 2012 to 500 thousand in 2021, a substantial 60 percent reduction. The nation also successfully eliminated trachoma in

2021, a significant victory in the battle against preventable blindness. Furthermore, proactive measures were taken to combat Bilharzia and soil-transmitted helminthiases, with rounds of mass drug administration carried out between 2016 and 2021.

Burkina Faso and The Gambia's achievements are also part of a larger groundswell of progress happening across the African continent, which is further demonstrated by establishment of the Common African Position and the Continental Framework. These two initiatives are pivotal commitments for African countries, reflecting the highest expression of intent to eliminate NTDs within the continent.

The Continental Framework outlines a bold vision to liberate Africa from all NTDs by 2030. It integrates strategies, emphasizing crucial aspects like creating dedicated budgets and increasing allocations to health. The Common African Position, endorsed by Heads of State, recommends priorities for African states, with regional economic communities as vital anchors. Africa's collective leadership in developing these frameworks and endorsing them at the highest political level demonstrates a unified front against NTDs.

### **A testament to the feasibility of eliminating NTDs across Africa**

The successes of both nations underscore the importance of disease surveillance, mass drug administration, robust national plans, and infrastructure development, highlighting the transformative potential of an integrated approach in funding and addressing NTDs.

What's more, the remarkable progress of African nations in combating NTDs serves as a powerful testament to the feasibility of eliminating these debilitating diseases. With the right strategies, political will and resources, the elimination of NTDs is not just a distant dream but an achievable reality, fostering a safer, healthier, and more equitable future.

The elimination of NTDs is an essential global goal that holds immense significance for public health and societal well-being. By eliminating NTDs, we will not only improve the health and quality of life for millions of people around the world but also break the cycle of poverty, allowing affected individuals and communities to thrive.

Additionally, by investing in NTD elimination programs, countries are boosting progress towards achieving universal health coverage, strengthen their health systems, and enhance their ability to prepare for and respond to other diseases and new health emergencies. Moreover, the eventual elimination of these diseases will free up substantial resources, both financial and human, allowing countries to reallocate funds to other important priorities.

The incidence of dengue and chikungunya has increased dramatically. These diseases that were negligible in our region a decade ago now pose a serious threat to the prosperity of our countries, and the fight against poverty, and jeopardize progress achieved to date.

## **The NTD moment at the Reaching the Last Mile Forum**

In this pivotal moment, the upcoming 2023 Reaching the Last Mile Forum emerges as a watershed moment in the fight against NTDs. Continuing in the spirit of collective action demonstrated at the Kigali Summit in 2022, the Reaching the Last Mile Forum will provide a global platform, not just for dialogue but for tangible commitments – and a rallying cry to renew our efforts and secure the path toward eliminating all NTDs. At the Forum’s NTD moment, nations, donors, and partners will stand shoulder to shoulder, reaffirming their critical support to end these diseases.

The successes of countries like Burkina Faso and The Gambia, among others, remind us that the potential for collective action knows no bounds. However, this moment demands more than celebration; it demands action. It is an opportunity to ensure sustained progress and lay the foundation for a more just and equitable world.

As we stand at the brink of a future free from the burden of NTDs, let this moment be a testament to our shared responsibility, uniting us across boundaries and inspiring unwavering commitment. Together, let us make history by reaching the last mile and ensuring a healthier, brighter future for all.

*(If you want to contribute and have specific expertise, please contact us at [opinions@cgtn.com](mailto:opinions@cgtn.com). Follow [@thouse\\_opinions](https://twitter.com/thouse_opinions) on Twitter to discover the latest commentaries in the CGTN Opinion Section.)*