



Health system strengthening through the integrated control of neglected tropical diseases (NTDs):

CBM's cross-sectoral trachoma programmes in Ethiopia link disease treatment and prevention with measures of health education as well as improvement of general water supply and sanitary infrastructure.

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Trachoma – a neglected tropical disease

Millions of people worldwide are affected by this eye infection. Most of them belong to economically vulnerable population groups living in remote areas. This is despite the fact that, through prevention and treatment, the disease could be prevented.



Foto: CBM/Diemer

↑ Mobile eye health teams systematically visit villages and settlements. They provide information, examine and treat people on site, and pass their knowledge on to local health workers.

Trachoma is a painful, highly contagious bacterial infection which, if untreated, causes strong visual impairment — up to the possibility of blindness. It spreads where poor hygienic conditions prevail and clean water is lacking. Trachoma is one of the neglected tropical diseases (NTDs) — see box right — which particularly affect people living in poverty.

High disease burden in Ethiopia due to trachoma

Ethiopia, the most populous country in East Africa, is the country most affected by trachoma worldwide. Here, millions of people live with the immediate risk of impending blindness. In CBM's project area more than half of all children are infected with trachoma — an immense challenge given the fact that general health care is only poorly developed in these areas.

An example: in Amhara, a region in Northern Ethiopia, CBM supports the local non-governmental organisation ORDA (Organization for Rehabilitation & Development in Amhara). Since it was established in 1984, ORDA has provided significant assistance to poorer population groups in the region, including a cross-sectoral programme developed in cooperation with CBM. The programme pursues, among others, the following aims which complement each other:

- 1) Improve water supply, sanitation and hygiene management (WASH)
- 2) Prevent the spread of trachoma
- 3) Strengthen the health care system

Cross-sectoral approach to strengthen the health care system

The trachoma programmes in Ethiopia supported by CBM are based on the SAFE strategy developed by the World Health Organization (WHO):

Surgery

If eyelid surgery is performed in time, blindness caused by trachoma can be prevented. CBM supports the training of specialists, the equipment of eye clinics, and mobile eye health teams for outreach missions in the country.

Antibiotics

Through the distribution of antibiotics, trachoma and other diseases can be eliminated. Mobile eye health teams systematically visit settlements. They treat people on site, distribute antibiotics to infected persons, and share information about causes of diseases and prevention options. This also involves close cooperation with local health workers, who are provided with equipment and training.

Facial Cleanliness

Hygiene awareness prevents trachoma and other diseases. In addition to training suitable multipliers like community assistants, village helpers, and teaching staff at schools, the approach of initiating and promoting school clubs has proven to be useful. Thereby, students raise awareness among each other. Additionally, they compete for new ideas on spreading information about hygiene and also bring these ideas into their families.

Environmental Improvement

The improvement and expansion of general water supply and sanitation is useful in the combat against the spread of trachoma and benefits the health care system at large. For example, the drilling and fencing of village wells does not only provide clean water but also separates the habitats of humans and animals. Through measures of training and support with the construction of accessible school toilets and washing areas, also children with disabilities are protected from infections.



Foto: CBM/argum/Einberger

↑ Community-based information and training workshops are decisive in the fight against NTDs.

Neglected Tropical Diseases (NTDs)

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines a group of 20 poverty-related diseases as “Neglected Tropical Diseases” (NTDs). Examples include schistosomiasis, lymphatic filariasis (LF), river blindness, trachoma, and soil-transmitted helminths. In most cases, NTDs have infectious causes and, in contrast to HIV/AIDS, malaria, and tuberculosis, receive less attention regarding research and development of appropriate diagnostics, medicines and treatments. Even in health programmes or measures of disease control they are, unfortunately, too often overlooked. This is despite the fact that, according to a WHO estimate, about 1.5 billion people worldwide, which is roughly every fifth person in the world, are affected by one or more NTDs.

NTDs disable, disfigure, stigmatise or kill; they keep children away from school or adults from work. Every year, about 500,000 people die from the ensuing complications. The global disease burden of neglected tropical diseases can be compared to the burden of HIV/AIDS, malaria, and tuberculosis. Furthermore, there are significant overlaps — the so-called comorbidities or coinfections like, for example, the increased susceptibility of HIV-positive people to certain NTDs.

In 2016, CBM received the “Water Award” of the International Society for Neglected Tropical Diseases for its innovative approach in the combat against trachoma in Ethiopia.

Sustainable health system strengthening will not be possible without combating NTDs

NTDs such as trachoma affect large population groups living in situations of vulnerability and poverty. Without combating NTDs, the principle of leaving no one behind cannot be achieved. For this reason, the neglected tropical diseases have been explicitly included in the third goal of the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (SDG 3). The spread of NTDs should be perceived as an indicator whether a health system works or not.



Foto: CBM

↑ If treatment is given in time, permanent disability can be prevented as here in the case of trachoma.

With the following political demands, we address the German government as well as all other actors relevant for combating NTDs like pharmaceutical companies, the scientific community and also non-governmental organisations in development cooperation:

We call for

- **an increase in resources for combating NTDs** according to the global needs. Research, the development of appropriate diagnostics, medicines and vaccinations as well as implementation programmes for prevention, information, treatment, and the provision and distribution of pharmaceuticals must be sufficiently funded;
- **the adaptation of all programmes and projects** in the area of health systems strengthening and universal health coverage (UHC) so that they will make a substantial contribution to combat NTDs. Cross-sectoral approaches should be increasingly pursued and strengthened like, for example, the

One Health approach* or the SAFE strategy of the WHO. This means that, in addition to human medicine, also veterinary medicine, education, agriculture, food security and WASH should be involved;

- **the improvement and harmonisation of statistical surveys** (regarding, among other things, data disaggregation) to get a global overview of the disease burden and to improve with the purpose of continuously monitoring the combat against NTDs.

*see <https://dntds.de/publikationen.html>

Author: Jan-Thilo Klimisch, March 2020

Contact details: Christian Blind Mission (CBM), e-mail: politischearbeit@cbm.de,
<https://www.cbm.de/unsere-politische-arbeit/inklusive-gesundheitsversorgung.html>

Christian Blind Mission (CBM) is an international Christian development organisation, committed to improving the quality of life of persons with disabilities in the poorest communities of the world. Currently, CBM is supporting more than 500 projects in about 50 countries.



CBM Christian Blind Mission

Stubenwald-Allee 5 · 64625 Bensheim

Phone: (0 62 51) 131-131 · Fax: (0 62 51) 131-139 · E-Mail: contact@cbm.org

www.cbm.de (German) or www.cbm.org (English)

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