

With this letter addressed to public, business and social policymakers, the German Network against Neglected Tropical Diseases (DNTDs) calls for placing greater focus in the current debate surrounding Ebola on poverty-related and neglected tropical diseases (NTDs).



The following have received this letter: Walter Lindner, Special Envoy of the German government for the Ebola crisis; Günter Nooke, the German Chancellor's Personal Representative for Africa; Prof. Dr. Lars-Hendrik Röller, Economic and Financial Policy Advisor to the German Chancellor for the G7/G20 summit and Head of Dept. 4 Economic, Finance and Energy Policy in the Federal Chancellery; the German Ministers for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), for Education and Research (BMBF), and for Health (BMG); the Chairmen of the Committees for Economic Cooperation and Development (AWZ), Education, Research and Technology Assessment, Budget, Health and Foreign Affairs; the parliamentary party leaders of the CDU/CSU, SPD, Die LINKE and Bündnis90/Die Grünen.

Berlin, January 23, 2015.

Position paper of the German Network against Neglected Tropical Diseases (DNTDs)

- **Focusing on Ebola endangers the fight against neglected tropical diseases (NTDs).**
- **Existing programs that fight NTDs can be used to contain Ebola.**

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), the number of new infections with the Ebola virus is now slowly declining. Experts nonetheless warn against premature optimism. The current Ebola epidemic continues to particularly threaten people in Sierra Leone, Guinea and Liberia. Completely overwhelmed local health care systems are often a significant factor in the difficulties the affected countries experience in developing and implementing effective control strategies. This underscores the necessity of rethinking the insufficient focus of Germany's current development cooperation efforts on providing basic health care.

We at the **German Network against Neglected Tropical Diseases** warn against a one-sided concentration on combating the Ebola virus. This kind of narrow focus will not meet the health care needs in the affected countries. As a result, efforts to fight many other diseases that are already neglected would fall even further behind. More people die *because of* the Ebola virus than *from* the Ebola virus. Moreover, a situation such as that currently experienced in West Africa could occur at any time in most of the countries of sub-Saharan Africa. The health care systems in many locations are weak and the risks for NTDs are high, including zoonotic infections like Ebola.

The **German Network against Neglected Tropical Diseases (DNTDs)** is therefore asking the German government to

- ! **Systematically strengthen the local medical structures and make them affordable as well as accessible for all people, without barriers.**
- ! **Support and expand the existing program to combat NTDs.**
- ! **Utilize existing NTD structures and capacities to combat Ebola.**
- ! **Support basic research for new medical interventions, especially in the area of NTDs.**
- ! **Expand and intensify government support of development programs for new vaccines, medicines and other interventions to combat NTDs.**
- ! **Integrate elements to promote health in all development programs.**

Good examples for the strengthening of health care systems

Programs fighting neglected tropical diseases are examples of successful strengthening of local health care systems. As part of national programs and in partnership with the WHO, nongovernmental organizations, the private sector (e.g. medicine donation programs) and the scientific community as well as in close cooperation with the public, these programs represent a suitable platform for multiple health interventions, particularly in Africa's neglected rural regions and urban slums. As examples from the Democratic Republic of Congo and Liberia demonstrate, they can also successfully be made available for fighting Ebola.

For instance, national onchocerciasis (river blindness) programs have been developed to make medicines that control parasitic infections (here primarily river blindness and lymphatic filariasis) available at no cost through public-private partnerships. These programs also support effective distribution and consequently represent an important, reliable link between communities and government health care services. Studies by the Tropical Disease Research (TDR) program at the WHO have shown that these interventions can be successfully combined with other measures such as the distribution of impregnated mosquito nets.

River blindness, lymphatic filariasis, trachoma, schistosomiasis, geohelminthiasis and other neglected tropical diseases are seen as "indicator diseases" for underdevelopment because their occurrence is a sign of population groups and regions that have been particularly "neglected" – especially with regard to their health and water supply, but also with regard to nutrition, infrastructure and political influence. Programs to combat these diseases should therefore be reviewed, suitably equipped and focused on strengthening preventive measures including vaccinations, early diagnosis and treatment as well as on inclusion of especially neglected population groups (above all women and girls as well as people with disabilities), and overcoming stigmatization and marginalization. It would be useful to systematically analyze and expand these programs in suitable areas for possibilities to link them with efforts to fight Ebola. Local employees from NTD programs could, for example, be systematically trained to assist in national measures to contain Ebola by explaining paths of infection to the population, through early diagnosis and prompt referral to the proper treatment facilities.

In the process, however, these NTD networks must not be overburdened. The goal should instead be to empower them sustainably for multiple health interventions and consequently to develop them as an important nucleus for an effective local health care system. This is primarily the mission of the WHO, the endemic countries and the participating implementation partners (including other nongovernmental organizations). Relevant partners from the private sector as well as academic institutions should be integrated into the process. Germany can and should systematically support such innovative measures.

Health-related elements as elementary components of development cooperation

The German Network against Neglected Tropical Diseases (DNTDs) welcomes the plans of the federal government to increase its initiation of programs to improve nutrition in partner countries. This not only helps improve living conditions but also contributes significantly to preventing zoonoses through the consumption of infected wild game. Undesirable side effects can however result, such as when irrigation systems used to reclaim land for agriculture promote the spread of disease-carrying vectors. Each development policy measure should therefore be reviewed for possible health risks and suitable countermeasures

should be systematically considered (mainstreaming health) – where possible, as early as the planning stage.

Conclusion

Health is of fundamental importance for the development of a country and its people. The health care sector should therefore systematically be strengthened as an elementary component of development policy. We specifically request that you consider strengthening local health care systems and especially programs to fight neglected tropical diseases in all measures to fight Ebola. In this context, existing NTD platforms and development programs for vaccines and medicines should systematically be supported and expanded. Effective NTD structures – as good examples underscore – can also be used successfully to fight Ebola.

The German Network against Neglected Tropical Diseases is eager to assist in organizing and implementing new ideas to fight neglected tropical diseases and to support the federal government in the process in an advisory role. We would be happy to provide additional information relating to your decision making and are also available for meetings.

With best regards,



Prof. Dr. Markus Engstler of the University of Würzburg, Faculty for Biology



Frank Gotthardt of Merck



Prof. Dr. Achim Hörauf of the University Hospital Bonn



Dr. Christa Kasang of the Medical Mission Institute Würzburg




Prof. Dr. KH Martin Kollmann of the Christoffel Mission for the Blind (CBM)



Dr. Dr. Carsten Köhler, (Tropical Disease Specialist and Director of the Institute for Tropical Medicine at University Hospital Tübingen)



Burkard Kömm of the German Leprosy and Tuberculosis Relief Association (DAHW)



Prof. Dr. Rolf Korte, (Honorary Professor at the Institute for Hygiene and Environmental Medicine at the University of Giessen)



Aziz Lamere of NARUD e.V



Prof. Dr. Jürgen May, (Head of the Working Group on Infectious Disease Epidemiology, Bernhard Nocht Institute for Tropical Medicine (BNITM))



Dr. Wolfram Metzger, (Tropical Disease Specialist, University Hospital Tübingen)



Dr. Beatrice Moreno



Dr. Timm Schneider, (Public Health Department, University of Düsseldorf)



Dr. Andrea Sydow, (Tropical Disease Specialist)



Dr. Matthias Vennemann, (Tropical Disease Specialist and International Health Consultant)



Roger Welz of WertSecur Stiftungsberatung und Management GmbH



Harald Zimmer of the German Association of Research-Based Pharmaceutical Companies (vfa)