The END Fund and Reaching the Last Mile Celebrate the Elimination of River Blindness in Niger

The WHO's verification of the elimination of river blindness transmission in Niger makes it the first country in Africa to eliminate this NTD.



Riverblindness is a cause of disability

Africa, January 31, 2025 –The END Fund and Reaching the Last Mile celebrate the World Health Organization's (WHO) verification that Niger has eliminated transmission of river blindness, an achievement in part made possible through the support of the Reaching the Last Mile Fund (RLMF).

RLMF is a multi-donor fund co-founded by Reaching the Last Mile, a global health initiative driven by the philanthropy of His Highness Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, President of the United Arab Emirates, and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. In partnership with countries and with support from other funders, RLMF aims to accelerate the elimination of river blindness and lymphatic filariasis (LF). RLMF in its first phase was hosted by the END Fund.

The WHO's verification is the culmination of nearly fifty years of collaboration in West Africa to control or eliminate river blindness. RLMF partnered with Niger's Ministry of Health to collect and file the evidence to support the claim for the elimination of transmission of this debilitating neglected tropical disease (NTD).

"Niger is a country rich in natural resources but, for decades, river blindness prevented its people from being able to plant vegetables, rice, and other foods and mobilize partners for greater economic benefit," said Dr. Salissou Adamou Batchiri, National Coordinator of Onchocerciasis and Lymphatic Filariasis, Niger Ministry of Public Health. "The disappearance of this disease has created a happier and healthier population, both physically and economically and encourages Niger to continue working to eliminate other NTDs. I want to thank not only the local authorities, but also the courageous community who lived in the formerly endemic area for their dedication and contributions towards the successful elimination of this disease."

By eliminating river blindness, Niger has created an estimated USD$2.3 billion in economic benefits. The country added more than 17.8 billion working hours as families with river blindness-infected members were able to rejoin the workforce, boosting GDP. Women who make up a disproportionate percentage of caregivers have been able to work again and have reinvested 90 percent of their earnings (USD$111 million) in their families and communities. Additionally, young girls treated for river blindness are likely to achieve higher levels of education and therefore higher wages in their lifetimes.i

NTDs are treatable, preventable parasitic and bacterial infectious diseases that needlessly hold back the lives and livelihoods of more than 1.6 billion people. River blindness, also called onchocerciasis, is a NTD that is the fourth leading cause of preventable blindness globally. Transmitted by the repeated bite of black flies that live along rivers and streams, the infection causes severe skin disease, visual impairment, and, in its most advanced form, irreversible blindness.

Globally, nearly 246 million people across 31 countries still require annual treatment for river blindness. Those living with the disease experience disrupted education and livelihoods, which affects their families

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and communities. Prior to the rollout of control and elimination programs, the risk of blindness due to the disease in West Africa affected up to 50 percent of adults. Entire communities abandoned their fertile river valleys to avoid the primary areas of transmission, increasing famine in affected regions.

"As a boy I grew up seeing firsthand the deleterious impacts river blindness can have on individuals and communities and thought that was just the way it was until I began my career in river blindness control," said Dr. Daniel Boakye, Senior Technical Advisor, Programs, the END Fund. "Nearly fifty years later, we have moved from controlling the disease to this historic verification, a testament to the power of partnership and the tireless work of many, and especially to the Niger government's commitment to its citizens, who will no longer experience river blindness as a way of life."

Established in 2017, RLMF began as a ten-year, USD$100 million fund, dedicated to ending river blindness and lymphatic filariasis in seven countries in Africa and Yemen through the delivery of mass drug administration (MDA), disease elimination mapping and training for lab technicians. Building on its successes including in Niger, its founders in December 2023 announced the expansion of RLMF to a target USD$500 million in support of an ambitious new vision: the elimination of the two diseases from Africa and Yemen by 2030.

"Niger's elimination of river blindness is an extraordinary victory and a source of hope for many other nations still fighting this devastating disease," said Nassar Al Mubarak, Chief Executive Officer of Reaching the Last Mile. "This feat demonstrates that with country leadership and the sustained support of partners, an Africa free of neglected tropical diseases is within our grasp. Now is the time for us to rally together to achieve it."

About Neglected Tropical Diseases (NTDs)

Neglected tropical diseases (NTDs) are caused by parasites (helminths, protozoa, ectoparasites), bacteria, viruses, fungi, and toxins. These diseases and conditions can cause effects such as deformed legs and blindness and can contribute to childhood malnourishment, cognitive impairment, stunted growth, and the inability to attend school. Social isolation and physical ailments make it difficult for people with NTDs to work, creating a cycle of poverty. Over forty percent of the world's NTD burden is concentrated in Africa, where the END Fund focuses the majority of its work.

About the END Fund

The END Fund is a leading collaborative philanthropic initiative dedicated to ending neglected tropical diseases (NTDs) that limit the lives and livelihoods of 1.6 billion people globally. Through our partners, we support country-led programs that control and eliminate intestinal worms, schistosomiasis, lymphatic filariasis, river blindness, trachoma, and visceral leishmaniasis. The fund puts private capital to work, advocating for NTD programs that are innovative, integrated, and cost-effective. It facilitates strong partnerships with the private



African man a victim of river blindness

sector, government partners, and local implementing partners to collaboratively support national disease programs. This is done through a proven implementation model that is tailored to meet the needs of individual countries with the aim of fostering healthier communities that are

protected from the risks of NTDs. Since its founding in 2012, along with partners, the END Fund has distributed over 1.8 billion treatments in 37 countries, performed over 143,000 life-changing surgeries, and trained 6.4 million health workers to preempt and treat NTDs. Learn more at www.end.org.

About Reaching the Last Mile (RLM)

Reaching the Last Mile (RLM) is a portfolio of global health programs, investments, and initiatives driven by the philanthropy of His Highness Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, President of the United Arab Emirates. Through innovative and collaborative investments, RLM focuses on advancing health equity, on ending preventable diseases that disproportionately affect impoverished communities, and on building resilient and inclusive health systems that meet the needs of the communities they serve. More at www.reachingthelastmile.com.