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Helen Keller International and its contribution to elimination of neglected tropical diseases

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ABSTRACT Helen Keller International (HKI) is a non-governmental organization, established in 1915. The mission is to save and improve the sight and lives of the world's vulnerable by combatting the causes and consequences of blindness, poor health and malnutrition. HKI's work on neglected tropical diseases (NTDs) dates back to 1950s with a pilot program to eliminate blinding trachoma in Taiwan. HKI's work on trachoma in Tanzania in 1980s and in Morocco in 1990s contributed to the development of the World Health Organization-endorsed SAFE strategy (Surgery, Antibiotics, Facial cleanliness and Environmental improvement) and the creation of the International Trachoma Initiative dedicated to the elimination of trachoma.

HKI is a leader in the control and elimination of onchocerciasis (river blindness) in Africa and played an important role in developing an innovative strategy: community-directed treatment with ivermectin (CDTI) to control onchocerciasis. For its multi-country support to control and eliminate onchocerciasis, HKI was awarded the AGFUND International Prize for Pioneering Development Projects for its "Sustainable Control of Onchocerciasis" program in Africa in 2009.

With funding from donors such as USAID, DFID, the END Fund and many others, HKI currently supports 10 African countries to control and eliminate one or more of five major NTDs: lymphatic filariasis (LF), onchocerciasis, schistosomiasis, soil-transmitted helminthiasis (STH) and trachoma which includes leveraging medicines procured or donated from pharmaceutical companies. HKI aims to build the capacity of Ministries of Health to conduct community mobilization, mass drug administration campaigns, morbidity management, monitoring and evaluation. Over the past 10 years, through its integrated NTD programs, HKI has successfully supported Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Guinea, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, and Sierra Leone to complete NTD mapping, initiate MDA, scale up to national coverage, monitor the progress, evaluate the impact and scale down (stopping MDA) once objectives have been met. In 2017 alone, across Africa HKI supported the distribution of over 110 million MDA treatments for NTDs as well as the screening of nearly one million individuals for surgery including follow-up surgery for 36000 affected individuals. By 2018, stopping MDA criteria had been achieved for trachoma nationwide in Burkina Faso, Cameroon and Mali and in most endemic districts in Niger, and for LF nationwide in Mali and nearly in Cameroon and in most endemic districts in Burkina Faso, Niger and Sierra Leone. Prevalence levels for onchocerciasis, schistosomiasis and STH have also been significantly reduced in these countries.

Moving forward, HKI will continue to collaborate with partners to support African governments to achieve NTD elimination goals and sustain the gains through mobilizing resources, building the capacity of Ministries of Health and strengthening existing health systems to integrate NTD activities. Joining this Alliance opens the door for HKI to collaborate with more partners on research and elimination of NTDs.

Keywords: Helen Keller International; Neglected tropical diseases; Elimination; Africa

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