

Advancing Sustainability in NTD Programs through Strengthening Ownership and Collaboration

ACT TO END NTDs | WEST
TECHNICAL BRIEF No. 1

For over a decade, disease-endemic countries and the global community have increased resources and worked together toward eliminating and controlling neglected tropical diseases (NTDs). With donor support, concerted partnerships, and local, national, and global coordination, national NTD Programs (NTDPs) have improved their efficiency, effectiveness, and impact.

While such support has enabled countries to make steady progress towards disease elimination and control, it has not reinforced national leadership to plan, implement, and fund NTD interventions fully and independently. At the activity level, donors and implementing partners focus mainly on providing support to NTDPs to plan and deliver services, often outside of the health system. This approach, while effective, does not fully leverage the capacity of national systems nor facilitate NTDP leadership across regional, district, or community levels.

With government-led NTD programs at the helm, NTD sustainability processes can focus on obtaining the technical and financial resources needed for increased ownership and accountability and for the mainstreaming of NTDs into national policy, financing, planning, and delivery structures. Sustaining NTDs' goals will require a shift in countries' relationships with donors, from an approach based on short-term humanitarian assistance and disease-specific programs to one that has NTD control efforts overseen and managed by national governments in order to reduce reliance on donors over time and promote locally-led development. During this process—already well underway across countries in Africa and Asia—countries will need to increasingly take the lead in every aspect of national NTD efforts as they work to mainstream NTD activities into health and other systems.

WHAT DOES COUNTRY OWNERSHIP MEAN?

In the context of NTD interventions, **country ownership** refers to government leadership of national stakeholders from every relevant sector (e.g., education, water, and sanitation, financial, planning) to implement activities and services aligned with government-identified priorities and goals. It is essential for fostering a collaborative decision-making environment for and holding stakeholders (e.g., NTDP, other government ministries, civil society organizations, community leaders, private sector) accountable. Full country ownership implies the government's commitment to facilitating **advocacy** (see box) efforts for mainstreaming NTDs into national policies, budgets, service delivery, and other platforms. Progressing towards sustainable country ownership must be gradual: it requires careful planning across sectors and stakeholder participation and buy-in to maintain programmatic and public health gains. Throughout this transition, donors and implementing partners should engage with countries in ways that promote and strengthen country ownership while leveraging external and government resources and capability.

The following sections describe insights drawn from the NTD sustainability approach supported by USAID’s Act to End NTDs | West Program. Now in its fourth year, the Program is employing the approach across West Africa as a pathway to strengthening country ownership, particularly by reinforcing the roles countries should play to achieve NTD sustainability milestones. It also aligns with the World Health Organization’s 2021-2030 NTD Roadmap’s third pillar, which describes “country ownership and financing with NTDs integrated in national health plans and budgets...supported by partners and donors to overcome outstanding challenges.”¹¹ Promoting country ownership throughout the five-phase process (as illustrated below in **Figure 1**), Act to End NTDs | West has collaborated with NTDPs to identify and begin addressing specific programmatic needs and objectives. **This brief provides an overview of how the first three phases of the approach have been applied to date with country-specific examples. It seeks to engage NTDP and national leaders in a discussion on the path toward greater country ownership and to generate dialogue among national governments, implementing partners, and donors on how projects and funding can best support sustainability.**

What is advocacy?

In the context of Act to End NTDs | West, the purpose of advocacy is to increase viability and support for NTD interventions within relevant government systems, the private sector, and civil society organizations. It will help NTD priorities to be included in planning, financing, service delivery, and reporting. NTDPs’ should advocate for:

- Incorporation of NTD-related strategies in national policies;
- Heightened budget allocations for NTDP activities;
- Integration of NTD services into other existing health service delivery platforms (e.g., school/medical training curricula, basic services package, supply chains);
- Inclusion of NTD indicators in health management information systems; and

Successful advocacy is built from compelling arguments with strong, accompanying data for the designated audience targeted for commitment to the cause. It requires an agreed-upon accountability mechanism for implementation and enforcement over time. NTDPs’ advocacy activities should respond to governments’ NTD priorities and help promote collaborative interventions to reduce health inequity.



Figure 1 Sustainability approach supported by USAID in West Africa

PHASE 1: ENGAGING A BROADER POOL OF NATIONAL STAKEHOLDERS

Traditionally, most NTD activities have been driven by countries’ NTDPs, with heavy support from donors and partners and limited engagement or investment from national entities. The purpose of Phase 1 of the USAID-supported NTD sustainability approach is to raise awareness around NTDs to a broader and more diverse pool of government and national stakeholders and to engage them in sustainable, country-driven NTD interventions. Throughout Phase 1, NTDPs in West Africa worked with Act to End NTDs | West to identify, encourage, and meet with traditional and non-traditional stakeholders within the MOH and across sectors. Together, they were able to provide stakeholders with a

¹¹ *Ending the neglect to attain the Sustainable Development Goals: a road map for neglected tropical diseases 2021-2030*, World Health Organization (2020), 9.

review of NTDs and their socio-economic burden as well as opportunities for mainstreaming NTD intervention planning and delivery into national systems to maintain sustainable services and public health gains. Act to End NTDs | West provided technical assistance for these meetings by conducting reviews of national policies and priorities to understand how to link sustainability strategies to elimination and control goals, by identifying decision-making stakeholders to attend, and by outlining integration opportunities across sectors. During these meetings, the NTDPs highlighted how NTDs affect various areas of interest to stakeholders represented (e.g., finance, planning, education and water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH)), and how these stakeholders' activities also affect NTD outcomes. These sensitization meetings sought to initiate multisectoral collaboration and coordination and to align NTD interventions with national economic and development agendas, such as Universal Health Coverage efforts or country-specific development strategies (e.g., Ghana Beyond Aid, Plan Senegal Emergent). Notably, these meetings were led by Ministry of Health (MOH) senior officials in their respective countries, such as the MOH's technical advisor in Senegal, the director of Ghana Health Services, and Mali's Director of Public Health, an encouraging indicator of countries' eagerness to own the NTD sustainability process.

To date, nine NTDPs in West Africa have hosted dialogues with national stakeholders on NTD sustainability, resulting in actionable outcomes. In [Ghana](#), stakeholders from the health, WASH, and education ministries worked with NGOs, civil society organizations, the media, and donor organizations to develop action plans and revitalize the Intra-Country Coordination Committee, a previously dormant multi-sector platform. **Benin's** NTDP discussed the meaning and importance of NTDP sustainability and the cross-sectoral efforts necessary to achieve long-term sustained programming. Participants identified priorities such as integrating NTD data into health management information systems; increasing the role of community leaders in raising awareness; and establishing health focal points across ministries relevant to NTD interventions. The NTDPs of **Côte d'Ivoire, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Togo, Benin, Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger** have all completed this phase and similarly engaged their stakeholders to advance a process towards sustainability. The political will and the high-level engagement of national stakeholders in Phase 1 helped establish the direction for Phase 2 and the long-term future vision of sustainable, country-owned NTD services and national investment.

PHASE 2: CONDUCTING A SELF-ASSESSMENT OF NTDP SUSTAINABILITY

Building on the political will and stakeholder engagement gained in Phase 1, Phase 2 focuses on conducting comprehensive analyses of both an NTDP's capacities and the country's efforts and investment in NTD interventions and services. This phase includes several types of partner-led analyses that culminate in a self-assessment driven by NTDPs using the Sustainability Maturity Model. This tool guides NTDPs in scoring themselves along a continuum for each of the USAID Sustainability Framework's six outcomes, seen in **Figure 2**, to determine the current state of their strengths and weaknesses and the milestones required to achieve their target goals in each functional area. To encourage country ownership, each NTDP determines its own targets for each of the six outcomes during this process. Completion of the guided self-assessment process has helped NTDPs discern how and where to leverage their strengths and address areas of improvement. **Sierra Leone** identified its 2021-2025 NTD Master Plan as a strategic vehicle to integrate NTD interventions more closely with the Ministry of Health and Sanitation's (MoHS) new health sector strategy. During the workshop, NTDP staff also identified the need to establish and routinely implement the multi-sectoral Partners Network Forum (PNF) to drive NTD Sustainability Plan implementation and continuously increase

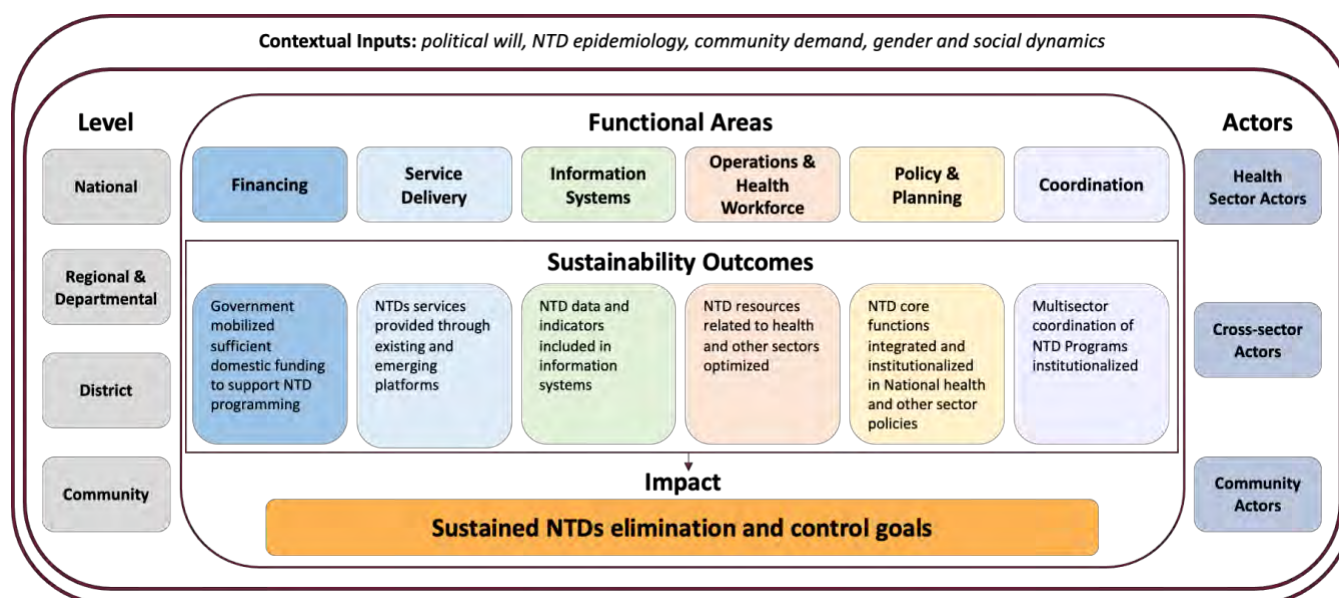


Figure 2 NTD Sustainability Framework

NTDP visibility and inclusion in financing within and beyond the MoHS. During Togo's guided self-assessment, the NTDP named several priority areas to fortify its finances and operations. Togo has seen significant decreases in prevalence of NTDS such as onchocerciasis, soil-transmitted helminths, and schistosomiasis through mass drug administrations conducted throughout the last two decades and eliminated lymphatic filariasis in 2015.

To maintain these achievements, the Togolese NTDP identified goals and timelines for regularly updating program planning and costing data to leverage in strategic discussions with key decision makers; refining surveillance systems in areas with high prevalence of control diseases; engaging the MOH to integrate NTD needs into health policy; providing morbidity management and disability prevention services through routine health services; and strengthening monitoring and evaluation and data management capacities. With a structured format for defining and prioritizing milestones in their respective contexts, these workshops strengthened NTDPs' commitment to invest in NTD sustainability. The work completed in this phase illustrates how the sustainability framework can be adopted to a country's unique needs. It has also strengthened buy-in among NTDP staff and allowed them to confirm responsibility and ownership of the process of discussing gaps, priorities, and targets before re-engaging a broader set of government stakeholders in sustainability planning discussions during Phase 3.

"The political will that was exerted through development of Côte d'Ivoire's NTD Sustainability Plan will be supported with government financing. This effort, which engaged stakeholders across different sectors—including education, nutrition, hygiene, agriculture, water, and sanitation—and mobilized strong community participation, demonstrates a key step towards sustainability of NTD achievements."

- Minister of Public Health and Hygiene
Dr. Eugène Aka Aouélé, Côte d'Ivoire

PHASE 3: DEVELOPING AND VALIDATING A NATIONAL NTD SUSTAINABILITY PLAN

Based on the results of their analyses and self-assessment, NTDPs engage leaders of key stakeholder groups across the government and private sector to participate in the planning process that leads to the creation of NTD Sustainability

Plans. This process outlines actions, owners, timelines, and accountability measures needed to achieve NTD sustainability targets and milestones. These plans serve as guides to achieving control and elimination goals and cement the need for country government leaders to fully commit to acting quickly and sustaining progress over the long term. Among the first countries to formally validate an NTD Sustainability Plan, Côte d'Ivoire was able to gain endorsement for its plan by the MOH and other governmental and non-governmental stakeholders in 2020. As the country's NTDP leaders navigated the process of developing and achieving official endorsement of its NTD Sustainability Plan, they reiterated to ministerial representatives and donors that achieving sustainability is critical to maintaining the gains made in controlling and eliminating NTDs. They subsequently advocated for NTD activities to be included in national policies, strategic planning, and health financing. Similarly, when Senegal's NTD Sustainability Plan was politically validated by several divisions of the Ministry of Health and Social Action, parliamentarians, ministerial representatives, local elected officials, and civil society groups, among others, every stakeholder committed to executing and developing the activities outlined in the plan.

LOOKING FORWARD: GOVERNMENT-LED IMPLEMENTATION OF NTDs SUSTAINABILITY PLANS

Phases 1-3 guide NTDPs through achieving critical milestones for the sustainability of NTD interventions and planning. Throughout Act to End NTDs | West's experiences, these comprehensive, coordination-intensive activities take at least one year to complete. For this reason, it is important to maintain the momentum gained to follow through on commitments outlined in the Sustainability Plan. Phases 4 and 5 of the process involve implementing these country NTD Sustainability Plans and monitoring their progress. Looking ahead, successful implementation of these plans will rely on continued coordination with multi-sector stakeholders and well-coordinated support of country priorities and ownership by stakeholders and donors. It will require a strong level of internal accountability established and led by the NTDP and other government stakeholders, using internal government mechanisms and multi-sector platforms such as Sierra Leone's PNF to track country implementation of sustainable NTD interventions and follow-through on commitments. As highlighted in a technical brief on [multisectoral coordination](#), some countries (e.g., Ghana, Mali, Niger, Senegal, Sierra Leone) have already established multi-sector platforms that uphold a clear mandate of responsibilities. Others, such as Côte d'Ivoire, plan to engage stakeholders in resource mobilization workshops to formalize commitments by the different government agencies supporting Sustainability Plan implementation. To support these mechanisms, any necessary technical assistance should be co-designed by country leadership, partners, external donors, and implementing partners to bolster country ownership, domestic resource mobilization, and other mainstreaming efforts, the latter explained further in a technical brief on shifting the dynamic of [technical assistance](#). Efforts to mainstream NTDs into national data, budget planning, supply chains, training, and service delivery among other systems should be supported as the ultimate path to full country ownership of NTD activities and to reduced reliance on donor support. Donor and implementing partners' transparent, collaborative work planning and alignment with national policies and NTD Master Plans are therefore critical to ensuring external support promotes country ownership.

Read more about Act to End NTDs | West's support for NTD sustainability in the Program's NTD sustainability technical brief series and on the Act to End NTDs | West website, which contains a detailed overview of the Act to End NTDs | West Sustainability approach, country sustainability profiles, and other resources.

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