Dynamic and Adaptive Technical Assistance for NTD Sustainability

The fight against neglected tropical diseases (NTDs) in endemic countries has seen great successes in recent years. After years of mass drug administration (MDA) and surveillance, NTD prevalence has declined for select diseases. In several countries, NTDs, such as trachoma, onchocerciasis, and lymphatic filariasis, have been eliminated and others, such as schistosomiasis and soil-transmitted helminths, are targeted for control.

These results are due in large part to coordination at local, national, and global levels with governments, national NTD programs (NTDPs), donors, and implementing partners. Maintaining this progress requires NTD program expansion and mainstreaming into national systems to ensure long-term *sustainability* of services and programmatic gains.

To this end, NTD donors and implementing partners must make major changes in their provision of technical assistance to facilitate increased country ownership and reflect evolving country needs to support sustainable NTD services. USAID's NTD Program Framework and Strategy for the Promotion of Sustainability definition of sustainability (see box) aligns with the World Health Organization's (WHO) 2030 NTD Roadmap, which focuses on integrating delivery across intervention-sharing NTDs, mainstreaming NTD management into national health systems, coordinating with other sectors, and strengthening health systems.[1] As countries assume greater responsibility for national NTD intervention planning and implementation, partners providing technical assistance must engage differently with NTDPs, and donors must adapt investments accordingly to foster country-owned and led programs. Rather than operational assistance aimed at optimizing current NTDP functions, countries now require *strategic support* to integrate NTDs into national systems and mobilize sustainable resourcing.

> In the context of NTDs, **USAID defined sustainability** as "the national health system capacity and commitment to maintain the provision of NTD interventions at levels that will continue progression toward control or elimination of diseases in accordance with national NTD goals."
>
> *USAID NTD Program: Framework and Strategy for the Promotion of Sustainability*

As part of a series of accompanying briefs on country ownership and multisector engagement, this brief discusses the technical assistance approaches from **USAID's Act to End NTDs | West** Program. It explores how technical assistance needs to expand, moving beyond strengthening disease specific programs, to facilitating NTDP efforts to engage and leverage national systems in ways that do not undermine government leadership, but rather, strengthen the leadership

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[1] *Ending the neglect to attain the Sustainable Development Goals: a road map for neglected tropical diseases 2021-2030,* World Health Organization (2020), 47 p.

capacity of NTDPs. This brief is not a report on results. It aims to share lessons learned and insights gained from Act to End NTDs | West's NTD sustainability activities, which are currently underway in nine West African countries with support from NTD implementing partners, donors, and global stakeholders.

SUPPORTING SUSTAINABILITY: FROM HERE TO WHERE?

Donors and partners contributed funds and assistance to implement and improve current NTD interventions in line with national elimination and control goals. This support has been delivered in the form of short-term technical assistance that focuses on strengthening the capacities of NTDPs to access drug donation programs and support service delivery platforms, frequently existing outside of national systems. This type of support, while effective, has not systematically strengthened all national NTD platforms, reinforced national leadership, or appropriately integrated NTD programs into national systems to ensure the long-term sustainability of services.

Shifting from traditional TA approaches focused on *supporting* national health systems to technical assistance oriented towards *strengthening* national systems requires a paradigm shift. *Supporting* the health system can include any activity that improves services, from upgrading facilities and equipment to distributing medical products to promoting healthy behaviors. These activities improve the system's functionality primarily by increasing immediate inputs (support) and can be short term, narrowly focused, contribute to competitions between health programs and missed integration opportunities. In contrast, *strengthening* the health system is accomplished by comprehensive changes to policies and regulations, organizational structures, and relationships across the health system that motivate changes in behavior, and/or allow for more effective use of resources to improve multiple health services.

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To ensure NTD programs contribute to broader health and development objectives, partners must adapt technical assistance to move beyond strengthening disease-specific programs and service delivery, to supporting national ownership, enabling efforts to systematically integrate NTDs into national governance, policy, planning, financing, and delivery systems.

Unlike traditional donor support of NTD activities—often vertically oriented and service delivery-focused—sustainability-oriented technical assistance supports activities aimed at generating cross-cutting partnerships, leveraging routine supply chains, service delivery platforms, M&E systems, and creating horizontal funding. Sustainability oriented TA should focus on mainstreaming NTD programming into other sectors and platforms to ensure the availability of commodities and sustain NTD services. For example, Act to End NTDs | West is supporting NTDPs to incorporate NTD indicators in the national health management information systems to ensure NTD data is captured in country-owned systems. Additionally, Act to End NTDs | West is looking at opportunities to support NTPDs to facilitate cross-sectoral NTD stakeholder networks to mainstream NTDs into health planning, financing, and service

delivery platforms at the national and community levels. As donor and partner support decreases over time, the existence and robustness of national structures and programs that can provide NTD services are crucial to maintaining NTD control and elimination achievements.

For example, Act to End NTDs | West aided **Sierra Leone**'s NTDP in mapping out the national budget preparation process, annual timeline, steps, and key stakeholders, to identify entry points and opportunities for dialogues on financing for NTDs. This exercise was accompanied by a funding gap analysis to provide current-state evidence of the financial needs of NTD interventions. This evidence was used to support dialogues with key stakeholders involved in the national budget process to identify where NTD financing, human resources, and services can be optimized in existing systems. Additionally, these activities influenced the NTDP's messaging to the Ministry of Health of Sierra Leone, resulting in a commitment to an increased budget allocation for the NTDP. The sustainability of NTD programs requires both increased domestic financing and leveraging of existing platforms. Therefore, dialogues on sustaining NTD elimination and control efforts should be delivered as a return on investment and not merely as an investment needed.

Incorporating NTD programs into national health, planning, financing, and information systems may take several years to achieve. Premature withdrawal of donor support can be disruptive and counterproductive. Increasing program sustainability requires careful and well-timed adjustments that avoid undermining current progress towards elimination and control targets. Technical assistance portfolios may need to include both short-term, operational assistance and long-term, sustainability-oriented strategic support.

ACT TO END NTDS | WEST'S TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE SCOPING APPROACH

Figure 1 Sustainability approach supported by USAID in West Africa

Technical assistance provided by Act to End NTDs | West is based on five phases that systematically identify and support NTDP priorities and needs. As displayed in **Figure 1**, the first three phases are devoted to increasing cross-sector stakeholders' understanding of the value of NTD interventions and outlining NTDP sustainability needs and goals. The process begins with several gap analyses of sustainability structures and capacities across six functional areas of the health system, seen in **Figure 2**, and of NTDP programmatic and financial data using the Tool for Integrated Planning and Costing (TIPAC). These analyses review the costs of activities, sources of funding, and identify financial gaps to support data driven messaging for increased government funding for NTDs within the national budget. Through an Act to End NTDs | West-facilitated, self-assessment workshop, the NTDP then develops a Sustainability Maturity Model (SMM) that identifies their maturity levels based on the six functional areas and outcomes of USAID's NTD Sustainability Framework, also demonstrated in **Figure 2.** The self-identified needs and

targets of the SMM serve as the foundation to develop an NTDP Sustainability Plan, a comprehensive and country-owned action plan to achieve financial and operational mainstreaming across sectors.
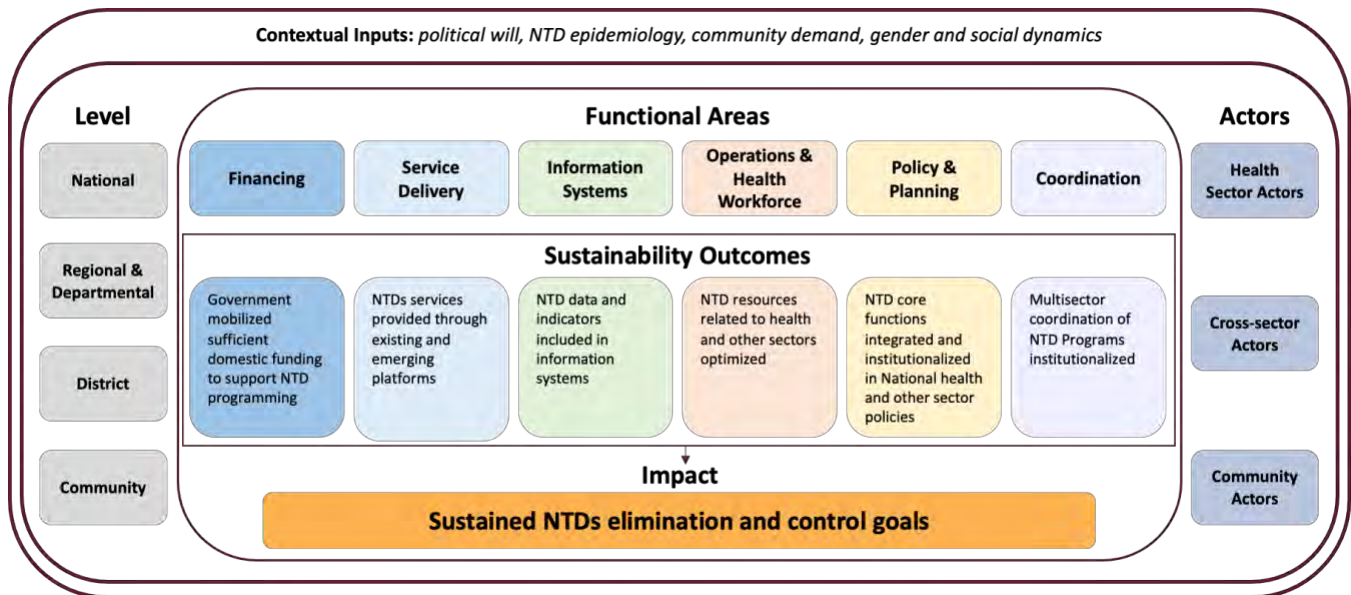

Figure 2 NTD Sustainability Framework

With Act to End NTDs | West's strategic support, countries have already achieved success across certain functional areas. In line with the **Information Systems** functional area, the consortium has initiated work with the NTDP in **Benin** and **Togo** to review data security policies, identifying gaps and developing recommendations to promote the long-term security of critical NTD-related data. In **Senegal** and **Sierra Leone,** Act to End NTDs | West's support of TIPAC data entry and analysis workshops—key activities under the **Financing** functional area—yielded data and insights that NTDPs intend to incorporate in the revised National NTD Master Plans for 2021-2025, as well as leverage in dialogues with budget stakeholders on programmatic funding increases. With strategic cross-sector engagement support from Act to End NTDs | West under the **Coordination** functional area, **Ghana** revamped the Intra-Country Coordination Committee, and **Senegal** established the NTDs National Multisectoral Committee, both multi-sector platforms responsible for overseeing the implementation of sustainable NTD interventions. Under the **Services** delivery area, **Ghana** and **Sierra Leone** are facilitating joint action planning to integrate NTD services into relevant groups such as School Health Education Program (SHEP), Water Resources, District Health Management Teams (DHMTs), and school feeding programs. Furthermore, Act to end NTDs | West has initiated support the NTDPs in **Ghana**, **Senegal** and **Cote d'Ivoire** to implement policy dialogues with a vast range of stakeholders to determine how well MMDP services can be incorporated into the established national health insurance structures, so that persons affected can access surgery services through the national health system.

Sustainability Highlight: Financial Planning in Togo

Togo's NTDP has made great progress within the USAID NTD Sustainability Framework even as external technical assistance has shifted, with partners helping the NTDP focus on sustainability rather than just leading NTD activities. As outlined in its Sustainability Plan and NTD Master Plan, the Togolese NTDP has prioritized regular review of financial data and strengthening of the program's financial management capacity by updating or developing financial management tools and training staff to use the tools optimally. Accordingly, Act to End NTDs | West has targeted its sustainability-focused support to meet the stated needs of the Togolese NTDP. Act to End NTDs | West subsequently trained NTDP staff to use the TIPAC to cost programmatic activities, analyze funding trends, and identify financial gaps. Additionally, Act to End NTDs | West supported mapping of Togo's national budget process so that the NTDP can develop effective and integrated budget advocacy strategies aligned with the national budget process and fiscal calendar. This exercise helped the NTDP understand key steps, timelines, and stakeholders in the national and MOH budgeting processes for strategic discussions on programmatic funding increases. Now, the NTDP uses financial data to identify key entry points and opportunities for dialogue, including framing the value of funding NTD control activities in relation to Government of Togo's broader agenda.

LOOKING AHEAD: ENGAGING NATIONAL PARTNERS AND EVALUATING PROGRESS

As Act to End NTDs | West moves with countries into the final two phases that focus on Sustainability Plan implementation and progress evaluation, technical assistance will support strengthening the leadership role of the government to build upon sectoral and intersectoral synergies identified in the previous phases and outlined in the Sustainability Plan. Act to End NTDs | West will work with NTDPs to strategically plan, increase multi-sectoral coordination, enhance data collection, and develop and adapt tools and frameworks tailored to country specific needs as they take full ownership of NTD sustainability. Such efforts include:

- Identifying entry points to incorporate NTD medicines, diagnostics, and commodities into existing national supply chains to ensure cost-savings;
- Enhance the capacity of NTDPs to collect, organize and present data to make a compelling case for mobilizing all possible funding avenues or including NTDs in benefits packages and universal health coverage policies;
- Facilitating intra- and cross-sectoral policy dialogues to mainstream NTDs into health programming at all levels and strengthen coordination and collaboration among stakeholders to increase efficiency and sustained NTD service delivery;
- Building NTDP capacity to manage, integrate, use, and protect data to track progress against milestones and indicators and draw insights on the sustainability approach;
- Strengthening information sharing capacity of NTD multisector coordination members to increase the visibility of NTDs and influence policies across sectors for NTD sustainability.

These activities will further strengthen the systems, processes, policies, and structures that underlie the Sustainability Plans and long-term sustainability.

As countries progress into the final phases of the Sustainability Framework, Act to End NTDs | West will support countries to review, measure and evaluate programming as Sustainability Plans are implemented. NTDPs can utilize this data to re-align activities and amend their approach. Partners must adopt adaptive management practices to ensure that technical assistance is dynamic in nature and always relevant to NTDPs' transforming needs on their sustainability journeys. Adapting technical assistance to transition to country-led implement of Sustainability Plans will maximize the impact of NTD programs, promote primary healthcare and improve the overall performance of health systems.

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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