

# What's tr**ENDING** in Asia?

## Supporting the power of partnerships in the Philippines

### *The NTD challenge*

More than one billion people are living with Neglected Tropical Diseases (NTDs), shattering the lives of impoverished children and communities around the globe. These diseases are coined "neglected" because they have received little attention from global health policymakers and donors until recently. In the Philippines, NTDs such as schistosomiasis (snail fever), lymphatic filariasis (elephantiasis), and soil-transmitted helminthiasis (intestinal worms) are endemic in many provinces throughout the country. The effects are extremely debilitating and can range from damage to internal organs, impaired growth and cognitive development in children, gross disfigurement and, in some cases, death.

The challenging political geography of the country – over 92 million people spread across more than 7,000 islands, some of which are still armed conflict

areas – has made advances towards the control and eventual elimination of these diseases uncertain and potentially expensive. "Our coverage definitely needs to be improved," said Dr. Leda Hernandez, Division Chief, Infectious Diseases Office, in the Philippines Department of Health (DOH). "We have set a minimum coverage target of 85%. But we haven't reached that in many areas, especially those that are very isolated."

### *Making a difference*

The USAID-funded End Neglected Tropical Diseases in Asia (END in Asia) Project, managed by FHI 360, has supported the DOH with the critical funding and technical expertise to help realize the goal of NTD elimination. Inspired by the USAID Forward commitment to local ownership, FHI 360 has helped the DOH to catalyze renewed enthusiasm and commitment among local foundations and corporations to tackle these diseases. The success has been immediate: in the past year alone, the DOH has galvanized several local partners to add NTDs to their existing public health efforts. A robust public-private partnership is now in place to help fund and manage the Filipino response to NTDs, involving partner agencies that have long-standing, on-the-ground and practical experience in community-based health programs in geographic areas previously unreachable by the DOH's NTD program.

One major focus of the DOH is the provinces on Mindanao Island which have some of the highest rates of overlapping NTD infections as well as high levels of extreme poverty, but where limited funding, a constant turnover of staff, rugged terrain, and serious security issues hinder regular annual mass treatment for NTDs, as recommended by the World Health Organization. These mass treatments must continue for at least five years in each community to fully interrupt transmission of infection and lead to the control and elimination of these diseases. After FHI 360 supported the DOH to hold advocacy meetings to

#### **SPOTLIGHT ON SARANGANI PROVINCE: A TRUE PUBLIC-PRIVATE PARTNERSHIP**

The province of Sarangani is endemic to several NTDs, especially lymphatic filariasis. Although the drugs for mass treatment have been available for some time in the province, the community had not yet been fully organized during past mass treatment campaigns, prompting Sagitarius Mines to contribute 1 million pesos (\$25,000) to equip the DOH with operational support to reach at least 85% of the province's nearly 500,000 people.

Motivated by this support, the DOLE Foundation helped bring together NGOs to raise awareness and mobilize communities to welcome the intervention. Even non-health related NGOs, such as those focusing on fighting illiteracy and poverty, donated their own resources to help support the cause.

Through these public and private efforts, the mass treatment coverage is now 85%, and Sarangani is on the road to becoming a filariasis-free province.



“...we are now able to reach a greater number of communities...”

resolve bottlenecks and inspire commitment to tackle the continuing burden of NTDs in Mindanao, several of the Philippine’s foundations and local NGOs signed up to support the government’s efforts. With the help of these organizations, the DOH and its counterparts in Mindanao carried out a much more successful round of mass treatment in late 2012.

The advocacy efforts of the DOH have helped to convince notable foundations like The DOLE Foundation, the Zuellig Family Foundation, and the Knowledge Channel Foundation as well as private sector companies like La Frutera and Sagitarius Mines to contribute human resources, media time, and funding to support mass treatment activities.

### *Future opportunities*

With the increased awareness of the devastating impact these NTDs are having on local communities in the Philippines, there is a renewed focus on getting the message out that mass drug treatments are vital to preventing the spread of these diseases. Through a new collaboration with the Knowledge Channel Foundation, a not-for-profit organization that operates educational TV and online media with relevant, dynamic, and engaging content, FHI 360 will support the development of videos on the three most damaging NTDs with messages encouraging the use of safe and effective treatment. These videos will be aired nationwide by the Knowledge Channel and also become a regular supplement to the school curriculum of the Department of Education. “The Knowledge Channel Foundation, Inc. (KCFI) is honored to be part of this timely project knowing that the need for public education on the effective treatment of

these NTDs is quite urgent,” said Rina Lopez Bautista, president and executive director of KCFI. “We hope that through the production and broadcasting of the videos on schistosomiasis, lymphatic filariasis, and soil-transmitted helminthiasis, the Foundation will be able to help significantly in educating the affected populace and the general public on disease prevention and proper treatment. We also hope that the videos will help galvanize them to action towards the elimination of these dreaded NTDs.”

Through sustained political will and continued collaboration among all partners, the vision of elimination of these diseases is slowly becoming a reality. In fact, the NTD budget for preventing and containing these diseases is expected to increase yearly. Dr. Hernandez: “The END in Asia project has helped to leverage our respective funding sources so that we are now able to reach a greater number of communities, especially those in isolated areas, and provide the necessary treatments to control and one-day eliminate these long neglected diseases throughout the Philippines.”

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