In July 2014, heads of state and senior ministerial officials from Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa will gather in Fortaleza, Brazil for the sixth annual BRICS Summit. The summit will cover a number of global issues, but it is essential that the BRICS leaders identify bold, concrete steps to alleviate poverty and suffering among the world’s most marginalized and vulnerable populations. As Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa work together to strengthen areas of cooperation, we urge them to make global health, and in particular neglected tropical diseases (NTDs), a top priority.

As a group, the BRICS countries have unique, fresh perspectives to share with NTD endemic countries and other development partners, drawing on the valuable technical expertise they have acquired while addressing their own public health challenges, including NTDs.

The seven most common NTDs — which constitute approximately 90 percent of the global NTD burden — infect nearly one in six people worldwide. These diseases result in long-term health problems such as blindness, delayed cognitive development, physical disability, severe malnutrition and anemia.

The impact of NTDs reaches far beyond the health sector. Efforts to improve education, water and sanitation, food security, and women’s empowerment — all indicators of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) — are strengthened by the control and elimination of NTDs. These devastating diseases also cause significant economic challenges to endemic countries and regions.

Many developing nations and emerging development partners, including the BRICS countries, have experienced impressive economic growth and development in recent years. However, the benefits of this growth are not always evenly distributed because of severe income disparities, unequal access to healthcare and limits on opportunities for economic prosperity. This trend is prevalent among the BRICS countries, as income inequality increased in every country but Brazil between 1993 and 2008.
Those left behind are most vulnerable to NTDs and other diseases of poverty. These diseases prevent students from attending school and keep their parents from working, which decreases human capital, worker productivity, and overall wealth. Studies have shown that people who are infected with lymphatic filariasis, for example, lose as much as 15 percent of their annual income.²

Because NTDs have such a large global impact that extends across sectors, the MDGs cannot be achieved without adequately addressing the problem of NTDs. Similarly, we cannot look forward to broad global economic growth until people — the drivers of that growth — are freed from the burden of NTDs.

Controlling NTDs is a fundamental step in ensuring that the most marginalized people are able to contribute to and participate in the growth and success of their community and their nation.

Why Can BRICS Help?

Collectively, the BRICS countries have a tremendous opportunity to use their voice to elevate the problem of NTDs on behalf of vulnerable populations and help the control and elimination of NTDs by the 2020 goals set by the World Health Organization (WHO). Many of the BRICS countries have taken important steps to address domestic health challenges and inequalities and have tremendous capacity for lending their expertise broadly.

Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa all face domestic health challenges. They make up more than 40 percent of the world's population,³ and are also home to many of the world's poor. They also account for a significant portion of the world's infectious disease burden, including four of the most common NTDs. Four of the five BRICS countries are home to more than 30 percent of the world's children at risk of soil-transmitted helminths and two of the five represent 45 percent of the world's population at risk for lymphatic filariasis.⁴

The experience, knowledge and technical expertise that they have acquired in addressing domestic health problems, especially NTDs, can be exported to other NTD endemic countries as successful models and best practices. Moreover, the BRICS collectively can offer significant resources to the global fight against NTDs and bring in more allies and partners to this effort through their participation in international and regional bodies.
Brazil, for example, carries the largest NTD burden in the Latin America and Caribbean region. To address that burden, the Brazilian government launched a national integrated NTD plan in 2012, which addresses multiple diseases through annual mass drug administration. This plan is tied to Brazil’s broader national poverty reduction plan, Brasil sem Miséria, institutionalizing the strong links between poverty and NTDs and the need to tackle them in tandem. As Brazil looks increasingly outward, the Brazilian Cooperation Agency manages South-South cooperation projects abroad to share Brazil’s health experiences. For example, in Venezuela, Brazil has shared its technical expertise to help accelerate the elimination of onchocerciasis among vulnerable indigenous populations.\(^5\)

Russia also has a valuable role to play. As host of the 2006 St. Petersburg G8 Summit, Russia demonstrated tremendous leadership on global health issues, making infectious diseases a top priority of the G8 for the first time. Russia has previously provided assistance in infectious disease control to its neighboring countries in the Commonwealth of Independent States, and could develop projects specific to NTDs in that region and beyond.

Both India and China have had successes in combating NTDs and could tap into this expertise and explore ways to share this broadly with others as they expand their bilateral partnerships and international activities. India is currently managing one of the world’s largest programs to eliminate lymphatic filariasis and could share lessons learned from this 50 year-old program.\(^6\) India has also shown success in addressing NTDs through school health and anemia control programs and could share this experience broadly to help other endemic countries replicate this model.

China can draw on its success in tackling schistosomiasis and lymphatic filariasis and help endemic countries do the same. For example, China has been successfully employing a multi-pronged, cost-effective approach to controlling schistosomiasis while also making improvements in sanitation and potable water.\(^7\) In the 1950s, China distributed drugs on a mass scale to eliminate lymphatic filariasis, a lesson that could be passed onto others.

Sub-Saharan Africa bears the heaviest NTD burden globally and South Africa could leverage its leadership as chair of the African Union Commission to advance the regional NTD response. As the only African nation with a seat at the G20 and BRICS, South Africa could also use these platforms to draw attention to this issue. South Africa could also export its knowledge and expertise, drawing on the Integrated School Health Programme which includes deworming, along with other key health interventions like immunizations and oral hygiene education.\(^8\) South Africa is well positioned to use its voice on the international stage and through South-South collaboration to help its African neighbors.

**We urge the BRICS countries to continue making advances domestically, and find ways to share lessons learned and success stories to improve the lives of those in their neighboring countries and across the world.**
The BRICS countries have increased foreign assistance significantly over the past five years. This is a welcome development, considering they hold nearly 20 percent of the world’s wealth and are expected to account for 37 percent of global economic growth between 2011 and 2016.9

The BRICS Health Ministers have publicly committed to enhance global health cooperation, including through South-South collaboration and trilateral partnerships, as they recently reaffirmed in their 2013 Delhi Communiqué.10 These unique models of cooperation allow them to play a valuable role in development, and present an opportunity for them to honor previous commitments made to promote equal partnership with other countries.

At the same time, investing in NTD control is a smart way for the BRICS countries to enhance their business investments in Africa and other NTD endemic countries. The BRICS countries are increasing their business investments in developing countries, especially in Africa. BRICS-Africa trade is expected to increase more than three-fold, from $150-billion in 2010 to $530-billion in 2015.11 Africa is also home to the largest global burden of NTDs. As these diseases dampen the return on investment dollars, the BRICS must consider the long-term costs of ignoring NTDs.

The BRICS’ economic growth and their increased engagement in international global health activities demonstrates their tremendous capacity to collectively invest in NTD control, allowing them to contribute to sustainable development interventions and fulfill promises to strengthen health activities.

As a group, the BRICS represent transcontinental interests, covering Asia, Africa, Europe and Latin America. Member countries participate in a number of influential international and regional economic blocks. These platforms could serve as a way for the BRICS to share their successes in fighting NTD control with others; raise the profile of the NTD problem on behalf of vulnerable populations across the world who do not have a voice; and galvanize concerted action at the global level. NTDs have a global impact across sectors and borders, and it is essential that this critical global health issue be incorporated in mainstream foreign policy, economic and post-2015 development discussions.
Together, the leaders of the BRICS countries have an opportunity to pool capacity, technical expertise, and financial resources to accelerate progress towards the WHO 2020 control and elimination goals.

Through their international cooperation activities and participation in international and regional bodies, the BRICS can support developing countries and emerging economies by giving them a stronger, more effective voice, reinforcing their own goals to promote a more equitable world.

The fight against NTDs is achievable because there is already a strong coalition of public and private sector partners who support this effort, and the cost of eliminating these diseases as public health threats by 2020 is $0.50 per person per year, on average. The effort to fight these diseases has also recently attracted the attention of major players in international development. In its October 2010 report, WHO institutionalized NTDs as a global health priority. WHO further solidified the importance of NTDs and cited “unprecedented progress” against these diseases in the January 2013 report entitled “Sustaining the drive to overcome the global impact of neglected tropical diseases.”

Along with WHO, the chief executive officers of 13 major pharmaceutical companies, philanthropist Bill Gates, and senior government officials from endemic and donor countries supported this effort by signing the London Declaration on NTDs in January 2012, an unprecedented global commitment to eliminate NTDs as public health threats by 2020.

Thanks to successful public-private partnerships, pharmaceutical companies donate most of the pills necessary to support NTD programs. As a result, expenses are largely limited to transporting the pills within endemic countries, mobilizing the public to accept them, training community health workers and conducting program monitoring and evaluation activities. As a result, these drugs can be delivered to people for approximately $0.50 per person per year, making NTD programs a “best buy” in global health.

It will be critical for BRICS and other global health leaders to work across sectors and leverage integrated approaches, especially now when donors, policymakers, and program managers must improve efficiency to achieve scale and impact with limited resources. If the BRICS countries fail to acknowledge and take action to address NTDs, the most marginalized populations will remain trapped in a cycle of poverty, robbing individuals and national economies of the chance to reach their fullest potential.

The Global Network for Neglected Tropical Diseases calls on the BRICS countries to:

1. **Share expertise on NTD control and establish new collaborations** through South-South or trilateral partnerships with donor and endemic governments to agree on international cooperative measures for disease control and elimination efforts.
2. **Increase investments in global health**, specifically for neglected tropical diseases.
3. **Engage in international and regional forums**, including mainstream foreign policy, economic and post-2015 development discussions, to call attention to the economic and social benefits of NTD control and elimination in public policy statements.
4. **Include NTDs in discussions during the 6th BRICS Heads of State Summit** and upcoming BRICS Health Ministry meetings.
Contact Information

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References