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## Ministry of Health announce plans to tackle neglected tropical diseases in Timor-Leste

On October 17<sup>th</sup>, 2013, a National Donors Meeting to support the elimination programme of neglected tropical diseases (NTDs) was held in Hotel Ramelau, Dili. The Minister of Health, H.E. Dr. Sergio Lobo unveiled plans to eliminate Lymphatic Filariasis, Lumbriga and Yaws and control worms infections by 2020. H.E. Dr. Sergio Lobo called on donor support from international agencies, development partners and NGO's for the proposed Mass Drug Administration campaign to fight NTDs which will commence in early 2014.

Neglected Tropical Diseases are a major public health concern in Timor-Leste. According to the National Parasite Survey conducted by the University of Sydney in 2012, there is a 17.5% prevalence rate of Lymphatic Filariasis and a 29% prevalence rate of worm infections (Helminths) among the population. Neglected tropical diseases particularly affect people living in rural, remote areas. If untreated, chronic disfigurement and disability may develop. There is strong evidence to suggest worm infections contribute to malnutrition and children affected often stop attending school leading to an increased burden on the health and development of the population.

In response, the Government of Timor-Leste has developed an integrated plan for the control of Neglected Tropical Diseases which also addresses other health conditions such as malnutrition, Leprosy, and Water and Sanitation. The Ministry of Health propose a 7 year Mass Drug Administration action plan from 2014-2020. The plan sets out a road map to eliminate Lymphatic Filariasis by 2020, eliminate Yaws by 2017, and control worm infections by 2018. The USD 5.3 million MDA program will be designed to cover the entire population of Timor-Leste and will involve house to house visits by community health volunteers for active case finding and treatment.



H.E. Dr. Sergio Lobo, Minister for Health, Sra. Natalia de Araujo, Vice Minister for Health and Dr. Jorge Mario Luna, WHO Representative to Timor-Leste officially open the National Donors Meeting on Neglected Tropical Diseases

'Despite the high burden of disease, success is possible whenever the country is committed and determined to fight the disease,' stated H.E. Dr. Lobo during his opening address. H.E. Dr. Lobo highlighted the Ministry of Health's belief that with donor support, this programme can transform community attitudes, drive policy change and mobilize funding. The Minister also gave his appreciation for the technical support of the World Health Organization, the University of Sydney, expert groups and other partners that support Timor-Leste in implementation of the strategy for control of the Neglected Tropical Diseases stating that 'technical assistance is crucial for the success of any initiative'.



**Dr. Ines Theodora da Silva Almeida, Director for Disease Control, Ministry of Health presents the Integrated Plan for Neglected Tropical Disease Control in Timor-Leste**

The campaign will be coordinated by a National Task Force (NTF) on Neglected Tropical Diseases, which will be established shortly after the donors meeting. Nominations for the National Task Force have been requested from Government Ministries (including Health, Education, Finance and Water and Sanitation), UN Agencies, such as WHO and UNICEF, development partners, academic institutions and NGOs. Dr. Jorge Mario Luna, WHO Representative to Timor-Leste, reaffirmed WHO's continued support to the Ministry of Health on the integrated plan for the control of Neglected Tropical Diseases through the provision of guidelines, consultants and procurement of medicines and wished the Ministry of Health every success with the implementation of this programme.

Several international donors and development partners were present at the meeting including the Australian Ambassador to Timor-Leste, H.E. Miles Armitage, representatives from WHO, UNICEF, World Bank, Conoco Philips KOICA, JOICA, World Vision, the Leprosy Mission, Mr. Steve Sutton from Rotary International and Professor Peter McMinn, the University of Sydney.



**Timorese dancers officially open the National Donors Meeting to support the elimination programme of neglected tropical diseases**