



News Release

The END Fund Celebrates the Expansion of the Reaching the Last Mile Fund to Eliminate River Blindness and Lymphatic Filariasis in Africa

The Reaching the Last Mile Fund (RLMF) will expand its disease elimination program for lymphatic filariasis (LF) and river blindness, the world's 4th leading cause of preventable blindness, from 11 countries to 39 countries after partners pledged more resources in the effort to end these two debilitating neglected tropical diseases (NTDs).

His Highness Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan, Minister of Foreign Affairs, UAE, stated, "Today's demonstration of global solidarity reflects a shared determination to deliver a better and more dignified future for all. Incredible progress over the last two decades has proved that a world free of NTDs is an achievable goal. We warmly thank governments, donors, and partners for standing with us as we strive to achieve it."

The RLMF, administered by the END Fund since 2018 in collaboration with the Reaching the Last Mile (RLM), the global philanthropy of His Highness Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, the President of the UAE, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and other investors, partners with local governments, the World Health Organization (WHO), and other non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to provide treatments, preventative care, and health worker training to accelerate the elimination of river blindness and LF in communities that lack access to quality health services, with a specific focus on reaching the last mile of disease elimination. Since its launch in 2017, RLMF has successfully supported strong country-led partnerships to prove elimination of transmission of river blindness in Africa is possible. Supported by RLMF, Niger has eliminated transmission of river blindness and Senegal has stopped treatment nationwide.

"These pledges represent an important milestone in our journey towards ending NTDs," said Tsitsi Masiyiwa, Board Chair, the END Fund, at the Reaching the Last Mile Forum. "An Africa free from river blindness and lymphatic filariasis will restore dignity and social inclusion to millions of people, while ensuring that others don't experience needless pain, stigma, and suffering. We know what is needed to eliminate these diseases, and countries like Niger have shown us what is possible, particularly in relation to river blindness."

The announcement was made during the 2023 [Reaching the Last Mile \(RLM\) Forum](#), held at the inaugural Health Day of [COP28 UAE](#), the 2023 United Nations Climate Change Conference. During a pledging moment at the Forum, Reaching the Last Mile and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation each pledged new \$100 million commitments to RLMF. The END Fund's donors ELMA Philanthropies, Legatum, the END Fund Board Chair Emeritus Bill Campbell and the Campbell Family Foundation, and UBS Optimus Foundation pledged an additional \$23 million. Board Chair Masiyiwa and her organization Delta Philanthropies pledged a \$5 million commitment.

“The expansion of the Reaching the Last Mile Fund is a testament to the strength of the model we launched in 2018 to prove that elimination of river blindness and lymphatic filariasis is possible on the African continent. By centering and supporting country leadership for disease elimination at national scale, the Reaching the Last Mile Fund has created a successful blueprint that demonstrates elimination of these diseases is possible – something many called impossible less than a decade ago,” said Ellen Agler, Chief Executive Officer of the END Fund. “Millions of people worldwide remain at risk of river blindness and lymphatic filariasis, so we are grateful to His Highness Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and others for their continued generosity and commitment to grow these efforts. The commitments announced at the Reaching the Last Mile Forum at COP28 bring us significantly closer to making a lymphatic filariasis-free and river blindness-free Africa a reality.”

Caused by parasitic roundworms transmitted through the bite of a mosquito, more than 794 million people are estimated to need treatment for LF. River blindness is caused by parasitic worms transmitted through the bite of black flies that live on the banks of fast-flowing rivers and streams. As of 2021, 244 million people were estimated to need treatment, 99.6 percent of whom live in Africa. In 2021, the WHO published its road map for NTDs which lays out targets for the prevention, control, elimination, and eradication of NTDs, including onchocerciasis and LF, by 2030.

The world is now halfway to the WHO’s target of 100 countries eliminating at least one NTD by 2030. The expansion of the RLMF across Africa has the potential to substantially contribute to meeting this target, as well as the disease-specific elimination targets for LF and river blindness. However, climate change has the capacity to trigger the continuing emergence of NTDs, as a warming planet can cause mosquitoes and black flies to move to new geographic ranges, bringing LF and river blindness to new areas and populations.

About Neglected Tropical Diseases (NTDs)

NTDs are a group of parasitic and bacterial infectious diseases that can cause effects such as deformed legs and blindness and can contribute to childhood malnourishment, cognitive impairment, stunted growth, and the inability to attend school. Social isolation and physical ailments make it difficult for people with NTDs to work, creating a cycle of poverty. Over 40 percent of the world’s NTD burden is concentrated in Africa, where the END Fund focuses the majority of its work.

About the Reaching the Last Mile Fund (RLMF)

The Reaching the Last Mile Fund (RLMF) is a multi-donor fund, initiated in 2017 by His Highness Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, the President of the UAE, with additional support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and other funders. The RLMF, which is administered by the END Fund, was initially designed to support elimination of onchocerciasis (river blindness) and lymphatic filariasis in Chad, Ethiopia, Mali, Niger, Senegal, Sudan, and Yemen. Six years later, on the basis of its progress and impact, it grew to support Ghana, Guinea-Bissau, Malawi, and Rwanda. The RLMF model puts country leadership in the driving seat of disease elimination and responds to their evolving scientific, policy, and program delivery needs with trust, commitment, expertise, and agility. The RLMF represents a proven pathway to eliminating disease and meeting targets set by the World Health Organization. More at <https://end.org/rlmf>.

About Reaching the Last Mile (RLM)

Reaching the Last Mile (RLM) is a portfolio of global health programs, investments, and initiatives working towards disease elimination that is driven by the philanthropy of His Highness Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, President of the UAE. Through its partnership and programs, RLM provides treatment and preventative care in communities that lack access to quality health services, with a focus on last-mile disease elimination. RLM's mission represents His Highness's dedication to ending preventable diseases that affect the world's most vulnerable communities, and to helping millions of children and adults live healthy, dignified lives. More at www.reachingthelastmile.com.

About the END Fund

The END Fund is a private philanthropic initiative that exists to end the most prevalent neglected tropical diseases (NTDs). The fund efficiently puts private capital to work, advocating for NTD programs that are innovative, integrated, and cost-effective. It facilitates strong partnerships with the private sector, government partners, and local implementing partners to collaboratively support national disease programs. This is done through a proven implementation model that is tailored to meet the needs of individual countries, with the view to fostering healthier communities, protected from the risks of NTDs. Since its founding in 2012, along with partners, the END Fund has distributed over 1 billion treatments across 31 countries, performed over 43,000 blindness and disability-preventing surgeries, and trained nearly 3.5 million health workers to preempt and treat NTDs. More at www.end.org.

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