

Reaching the Last Mile Fund: FAQ

What is the Reaching the Last Mile Fund (RLMF)?

The Fund is a ten-year, multi-donor fund, initiated and led by His Highness Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, and announced on November 15, 2017 at the Reaching the Last Mile global health forum in Abu Dhabi. It aims to pave the way for global elimination of river blindness (also known as onchocerciasis) by building on past successes, complementing ongoing efforts, and reducing the disease's global footprint. In doing so, the Fund will also work towards lymphatic filariasis elimination as a public health problem in countries where these diseases are co-endemic.

Who are the founding partners of the Fund?

The Fund builds on the longstanding partnership between His Highness Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed and Bill Gates in global health and development. His Highness has committed \$20 million to the overall Fund, which is expected to reach \$100 million, with up to \$20 million in support (or 20% of the overall fund) pledged by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. In May 2018, the United Kingdom announced that the Department for International Development (DFID) will contribute £1 million to the Fund.

How will the Fund work?

The Reaching the Last Mile Fund is housed within the END Fund – a philanthropic investment platform focused on tackling the five most common NTDs – and works closely with the donors, the World Health Organization (WHO), and governments of affected countries. It tops up and strengthens existing programs in its focus countries and works collaboratively with country ministries of health to design tailored disease elimination strategies best suited to each country's unique needs. Twenty percent of the yearly grantmaking budget of funds committed to date are earmarked for the WHO's Expanded Special Project for Elimination of Neglected Tropical Disease (ESPEN).

Using best practices and integrating new technologies, the END Fund looks to accelerate progress toward the elimination of both diseases in all focus countries. It will conduct macro and micro planning and budgeting for all programs and then inform and make recommendations to the RLMF Steering Committee for decision before implementing. Implementation also includes providing technical assistance to ministries and implementing partners and conducting project and fiscal management on all grants.

Why the focus on river blindness and lymphatic filariasis?

River blindness and lymphatic filariasis are painful, debilitating, and disfiguring diseases that currently affect hundreds of millions of people, largely in sub-Saharan Africa.

With nationwide elimination of river blindness achieved in Mexico, Colombia, Guatemala, and Ecuador, and local elimination achieved in parts of Uganda and Sudan, the time is ripe to replicate these successes and push for river blindness elimination across entire countries in Africa. In addition to sparing tens of millions of people from the risk of a painful and disfiguring disease, studies estimate that river blindness elimination in Africa could generate up to US\$6 billion in economic benefits across the continent.

Since river blindness and lymphatic filariasis require the same drug treatment program – mass drug administration (MDA) with ivermectin at least once a year for 10 to 15 years – the Fund will work towards the elimination of both diseases in countries where they are co-endemic.

The Fund is supported by in-kind contributions from GlaxoSmithKline plc, which will continue to donate albendazole treatments over the next ten years to deworm school-age children in target countries, and Merck Sharp & Dohme, which will continue to donate ivermectin to treat river blindness through the Mectizan Donation Program.

What are river blindness and lymphatic filariasis?

River blindness is caused by the parasitic worm *Onchocerca volvulus*, causing severe itching, skin disfigurement, and blindness. More than 197 million people in 31 countries worldwide are in need of treatment for river blindness.

More than 856 million people in 53 countries are in need of treatment for lymphatic filariasis, which is caused by transmission of filarial parasites through mosquitoes. Lymphatic filariasis damages the lymphatic system which causes abnormal growth of body parts called elephantiasis and can lead to disability, social stigma, and isolation.

Where will the Reaching the Last Mile Fund focus its attention, and why?

As of 2018, the Fund aims to support river blindness elimination in Mali, Senegal, Niger, Chad, Sudan, and Ethiopia in Africa as well as in Yemen in the Middle East.

The Fund tailors its approach according to the level of disease burden in each country. In countries with few or no cases of river blindness, the Fund will help to close the gap to elimination and verification, while in high-burden countries it will scale up mass drug administration programs and river blindness elimination verification activities.

What is the END Fund?

The END Fund is the only private philanthropic initiative solely dedicated to ending the five most common neglected tropical diseases (NTDs), which affect more than 1.5 billion people globally. It 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 and aims to support national disease control programs in over 29 countries.

Since its founding in 2012, with its partners, the END Fund has provided over 500 million donated treatments worth almost \$933 million, over 115400 surgeries for people suffering from the effects of the advanced stages of elephantiasis and trachoma, and trained more than 1.1 million people in NTD control and elimination efforts.