

Task Force on definitions, criteria and indicators for interruption of transmission and elimination of leprosy

Report of the final meeting

Chengalpattu, India, 24-26 March 2021

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1. Introduction

Addressing the leprosy burden is passing through different stages in different countries. Most countries have eliminated leprosy as a public health problem; several have already achieved interruption of transmission, while others are progressing to this. Some other countries have already eliminated the disease, i.e. they were formerly endemic.

Encouraged by having achieved the milestone of elimination as a public health problem, countries would like to move to next phases: interruption of transmission and absence of disease. Annual leprosy statistics submitted by countries indicate that several countries have consistently reported zero new cases of leprosy in recent years.

The number of countries with zero new autochthonous leprosy cases (target: 120 by 2030) is one of the indicators of the Road map for Neglected Tropical Diseases and Global Leprosy Strategy 2021–2030. This achievement will need to be ascertained, which may include the submission of a dossier and/or independent review. Following an informal consultation on the same subject, held in Mexico in February 2020, a Task Force on definitions, criteria and indicators for interruption of transmission and elimination of leprosy (TFCEL) was set up to draft definitions for concepts concerning interruption of transmission and elimination of leprosy as a disease with criteria and milestones for assessment. The Task force met virtually on a monthly basis.

The final meeting of TFCEL was held as a blended meeting, i.e. a day-time face-to-face with TFCEL members and additional experts based in India; and virtual sessions in the evening with TFCEL members based elsewhere. This meeting was held at the Central Leprosy Teaching and Research Institute (CLTRI), Chengalpattu, India from 24 to 26 March 2021. The purpose of the meeting was to reach an agreement on criteria to define interruption of transmission and elimination of disease, to recommend a template for country dossier and propose a verification exercise.

2. Inaugural session

2.1. Welcome remarks by WHO

Dr Erwin Cooreman, Team Leader, Global Leprosy Programme (GLP), welcomed the participants and informed that a Task Force was set up a year ago to specifically look into coming up with criteria to define 'elimination of leprosy'. The Task Force's work encompassed drafting practical definitions to define interruption of transmission and elimination of disease; identifying criteria of different phases in leprosy control; drafting a framework that can be used for verification purpose. Several meetings were held with the task force and its subcommittees. While developing these documents references were also taken from other diseases.

During this final meeting there would be further discussions on the documents developed by TFCEL and recommendations were expected on how to verify the end disease elimination.

2.2. Inaugural address by Government of India

Ms Rekha Shukla, Joint Secretary, Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Government of India, gave the inaugural address. She expressed sincere thanks to WHO for the opportunity given to contribute to the particular issue. Recalling her participation in the Global Training of National Leprosy Programme (NLP) Managers from Priority Leprosy Endemic Countries (Bangkok, Thailand, 23-25 April 2019), she got much inspired by WHO's vision for zero leprosy and the collaboration of partners – under the umbrella of the Global Partnership for Zero Leprosy – towards 'zero discrimination, zero disease and zero disability'. These three zeros indicated prompted for a change in India's leprosy programme, moving beyond elimination as a public health problem at sub-national level towards interruption of transmission and elimination of the disease. Action plans are prepared accordingly. Political commitment has gained a new momentum as is reflected in a ten-fold increase in proposed budget for achieving a leprosy-free India. The honourable Prime Minister personally appealed for "*Kusthrog Mukht Bharat*" ("Leprosy-free India").

Being in charge of control of NTDs In India, Ms Shukla is also privy to the NTD Road map 2021–2030. She expressed her happiness with the next leprosy milestone of interruption of transmission and elimination of disease.

India's leprosy programme is an integrated programme. It is part of the country's National Health Mission. There is convergence with other health programmes such as School Health Programme, Adolescent Health Programme, Health and Wellness Centres as well as screening in slums by Urban Primary Health Centres. India is a huge country with a population of 1.38 billion and more than 700 districts. She, therefore, urged to consider applying the different phases and indicators to define interruption of transmission and elimination of the leprosy at the sub-national level (state or – even better – district level).

She expressed her gratitude for the support from WHO to India's National Leprosy Eradication Programme. She said that she was looking forward to a productive meeting.

2.3. Objectives and expected outcomes of the meeting

Dr VRR Pemmaraju, Technical Officer GLP, briefed the meeting participants on the objectives and expected outcomes of the meeting.

The general Objective of the meeting was to discuss and draft the 'verification process' for defining interruption of transmission/elimination of leprosy.

The specific objectives were:

1. To discuss the documents developed by TFCEL and its subcommittees; and make recommendations on the process of verification;
2. To decide on the criteria for defining different phases and specific indicators to be considered to define interruption of transmission and elimination of disease, taking into consideration the NTD Road map 2020–2030;

3. To advise on a template for *Country Dossier* to be submitted at the time of claiming achievement of interruption of transmission and elimination of disease;
4. To validate criteria and tools with data from very low or nil burden districts/blocks in India and countries.

The expected results of the meeting included the following:

- ✓ Agreement on criteria to define interruption of transmission/elimination of disease;
- ✓ Template for Country Dossier developed and ready for field-testing;
- ✓ Verification exercise (epidemiological part) conducted for selected districts/blocks in India.

3. Task force on definitions, criteria and indicators for transmission and elimination of leprosy

3.1. Informal Consultation on defining criteria to declare elimination of leprosy: Conclusions and recommendations

Dr Md. Jamsheed Ahmed, Regional Adviser (NTDs), WHO South-East Asia Region, presented a summary of the Informal Consultation on defining criteria to declare elimination of leprosy which was held in Mexico City, Mexico, from 10-12 February 2020.

The main conclusions were:

- ✓ Elimination of leprosy as a public health problem has been achieved in almost all countries, often many years ago. An acknowledgement of such achievement can be given to countries, requesting this.
- ✓ The meeting agreed that past achievements should be built on and directly linked to the preparations needed to work towards interruption of transmission, as specified in the NTD Roadmap 2021–2030.
- ✓ To move forward certain conditions should be met. This would include (but is not limited to) a country roadmap towards zero leprosy, a case-based management information system (including additional indicators such as grade-2 disability (G2D), child cases, duration of symptoms), a well-performing surveillance system, sustained capacity to detect and manage

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