

# LEADING THE FIGHT AGAINST NEGLECTED TROPICAL DISEASES IN ETHIOPIA

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Neglected Tropical Diseases (NTDs) are affecting about a quarter of the world's population and primarily the poorest people. These diseases are the hallmark of poverty and are a major cause for its persistence in all developing countries, particularly in Africa. They may also have a major influence on the spread and intensity of the three large epidemics – AIDS, tuberculosis, and malaria – but have been largely neglected by developed countries, where they are practically nonexistent. Up to 50% of the entire African population suffers from NTDs, and negative health effects include retardation of growth, anemia, poor cognitive functioning and liver disease.

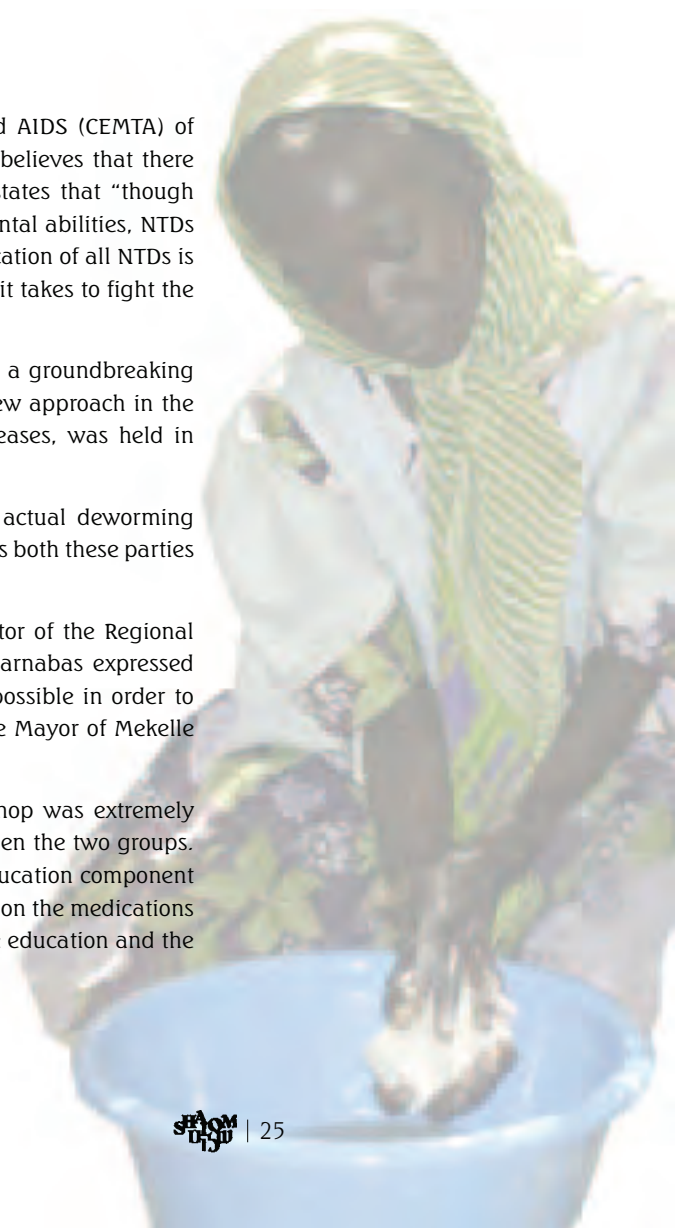
Professor Zvi Bentwich, head of the Center for Tropical Diseases and AIDS (CEMTA) of the Faculty of Health Sciences at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, believes that there is a connection between NTDs and the AIDS epidemic in Africa. He states that “though responsible for serious morbidity, and affecting general growth and mental abilities, NTDs have been largely neglected by the Western developed countries. Eradication of all NTDs is achievable for an extremely modest cost, which is much less than what it takes to fight the more recognized epidemics like AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria.”

Taking steps to address this public health threat, MASHAV organized a groundbreaking workshop focusing on deworming. The workshop, part of MASHAV's new approach in the field of eradicating and controlling communicable and infectious diseases, was held in October, 2008 in Mekelle, Ethiopia.

The workshop was developed in preparation for the launch of the actual deworming project. Participants included local health workers and school teachers, as both these parties were responsible for carrying out the project in their communities.

The workshop was opened officially by Dr. Gebraab Barnabas, Director of the Regional Health Bureau, under whose auspices the workshop took place. Dr. Barnabas expressed strong support for the deworming project, promising to do whatever possible in order to facilitate and help make it a reality. Similar support was voiced by the Mayor of Mekelle and the head of the local education office.

The participation of both health workers and teachers in the workshop was extremely successful for both parties, making this the first ever cooperation between the two groups. The success of the deworming project in Mekelle relies on the health education component and the ability to reach as large an audience as possible, and not simply on the medications alone, so it was essential to engender intense collaboration between the education and the health systems.





Professor Bentwich with the participants in the Deworming Workshop in Mekelle



**DEWORMING WORKSHOP**

The success of this unique workshop was possible thanks to the combined efforts of the cooperating parties: Tigray's Regional Bureaus of Health and Education and the local school authorities, the Earth Institute's Millennium Cities Initiative-MCI [See article on page 17], the Center for National Health Development in Ethiopia (CNHDE), CEMTA, MASHAV, and the Israeli Embassy in Ethiopia.

The joint deworming program combines the provision and administration of antihelminthic medications, which consist of a few pills given every four to six months, with an educational program on how to improve hygiene and protect populations from exposure to the parasites. The workshop raised a new awareness regarding the lack of latrines and water taps in a significant number of schools in Mekelle. Since latrines and access to clean water are critical for preventing re-exposure and re-infection, MASHAV, in cooperation with the Municipality of Mekelle, constructed new latrines and water taps in thirty schools in the town.

Prof. Bentwich concludes: "Eradication of NTDs is an extremely potent and powerful way to improve the well-being of the poorest populations in the world afflicted with these diseases. The cumulative experience gained from the Ethiopian endeavor can be copied and transferred to other countries in Africa, Asia and South America. The essentials of the program can be used as a template to train health personnel and local populations, and, together with the provision of medications, can be implemented widely. The success of the program is clearly dependent on a comprehensive approach that combines therapy, health education, improved sanitation, and access to clean water. There is no other health intervention in the world that is anywhere near it in cost-effectiveness and profound impact on general health."



Latrines and access to clean water are critical in fighting NTDs: Newly constructed latrines and water taps in Mekelle