

ITM aims for elimination of sleeping sickness

Belgium, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the Institute of Tropical Medicine Antwerp join hands to eliminate sleeping sickness.

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Belgium, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the Institute of Tropical Medicine Antwerp (ITM) join hands to eliminate sleeping sickness. Thanks to progress in the areas of diagnosis, treatment, digitalisation and control of the tsetse fly that transmits the disease, it is now possible to give sleeping sickness the deathblow.

On the initiative of Belgian Minister of Development Cooperation Alexander De Croo, the Belgian Development Cooperation and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation will invest nearly 50 million euro in the fight against sleeping sickness over the coming nine years. ITM will coordinate the programme in collaboration with the World Health Organization (WHO), Congolese, Belgian and international partners. The new initiative, which is additional to earlier engagements by Belgium and the Gates Foundation, was presented on 19 April 2017 in Geneva during a [summit on neglected tropical diseases](#).

Sleeping sickness is caused by parasite transmitted by the tsetse fly. This fly is only found in Africa. The initial presentation of sleeping sickness is characterised by fever and general weakness. In an advanced stage, sleeping sickness leads to coma. Untreated, the disease is always deadly. Each year thousands of new cases are still reported in Africa, the majority of which occur in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). The past has shown that the disease flares up again if control efforts are interrupted and complete elimination of the disease will be challenging.

Internationally, Belgium is regarded as a pioneer in the fight against sleeping sickness, because of the scientific expertise of ITM and the control efforts Belgium made in the DRC, the primary reservoir for sleeping sickness. "With this ambitious programme we aim not only at eliminating the deadly sleeping sickness, but we also reinforce basic health care, in collaboration with our Congolese partners. This initiative therefore also benefits the control of other infectious diseases and the health of the local population in general,"

said ITM Director Bruno Gryseels.

With the support of the Gates Foundation, ITM tested the new approach in recent years in a research pilot project. The new approach is based on new (rapid) diagnostic tests, more effective fly traps, digital data processing and more efficient population screening. The new programme will be led by Prof. Marleen Boelaert.

In Geneva, Bill Gates praised ITM's expertise and indicated why the Institute is well placed to tackle sleeping sickness: "In this intensification period with new tools, ITM have been the ones who have found the right ways to get out to even the most remote parts of the DRC where most of the disease burden is."

Five reasons why now is the time to eliminate sleeping sickness:

- **Diagnosis:** new rapid tests are available that allow new cases to be identified more quickly and precisely.
- **Treatment:** Starting in 2018, treatment using medication in pill form rather than injections will be possible. This medication will also be much safer than it used to be.
- **Control:** the tsetse fly can be controlled more efficiently via *tiny targets* that attract and destroy the flies. Converting the mobile teams into smaller, more flexible units increases the efficiency and sustainability of the population screening programme.
- **Digital revolution:** Population screening is more efficient thanks to digital data registration. Using a combination of these digitised data and satellite information about the natural environment allows a more targeted approach to identifying the sources of contaminations.
- **International coalition:** For the first time, a broad international coalition is ready and waiting to permanently eliminate sleeping sickness. Belgium, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, ITM, the WHO, Congolese, Belgian and international partners have joined forces to achieve this goal. The ambition is supported by the [London Declaration of 2012](#), under the leadership of the World Health Organization.

More information

- [Belgium announces decisive push to eliminate sleeping sickness by 2025](#)
- [Fact sheet elimination of sleeping sickness](#)