

# No rest for the weary - why ITM continues to develop new sleeping sickness tests

Tireless effort is crucial to eliminate the disease. 30 January is World NTD Day.

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Dit is de omschrijving

**On 30 January 2021 the second edition of 'World Neglected Tropical diseases Day' (World NTD Day) will take place. This year the Institute of Tropical Medicine (ITM) in Antwerp wants to put one of these neglected tropical diseases in the spotlight, namely sleeping sickness. For years, ITM has been at the forefront of the fight against this deadly disease, thanks to researchers who continue to develop new diagnostics and innovative control strategies. This tireless effort is crucial to ultimately eliminate sleeping sickness.**

Every year, several hundred cases of sleeping sickness are still reported in Africa, with the vast majority in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Although ITM and its partners are on track to eliminate sleeping sickness by 2030, this is no easy feat. In the past the disease flared up when attention to it weakened so it is essential that researchers continue to develop new tests that are adapted to local conditions and the changing phase of sleeping sickness. In short, different types of diagnostic tests are needed to serve different purposes.

New sleeping sickness tests are not developed to replace existing tests, but to meet specifications that we need at the moment. It may happen that different types of test are used at the same time, in the same country. For example, a test that has to be kept cool is useful for mobile teams that travel to villages, a rapid test can be used for individuals that live in areas that are difficult to reach, another type of test can be used to test a large part of the population, and so on. That is why ITM continues to develop new tests, which are adapted to the circumstances and the phase of elimination of sleeping sickness.

Neglected tropical diseases are a group of 20 diseases that mainly occur in low-income countries. About 1.6 billion people are at risk of neglected diseases. These diseases are particularly prevalent in populations living in poverty. Sleeping sickness is caused by parasites transmitted by the tsetse fly. The disease occurs almost exclusively in DRC and is characterised in the initial phase by fever and general weakness. In an advanced stage of the disease, sleeping sickness leads to coma, hence the name of the disease. Without treatment, the disease is always fatal.

On Saturday 30 January, DRC focuses on sleeping sickness as part of their National Sleeping Sickness Day. ITM is working with its Congolese partners to eliminate the disease by 2030. The project is funded by Belgian Development Cooperation and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.