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HELEN KELLER INTERNATIONAL AWARDED MAJOR GRANT BY USAID TO TACKLE NEGLECTED TROPICAL DISEASES IN AFRICA

Burkina Faso, Cameroon and Ethiopia Are Target Countries for Effort to Address Conditions Linked to Two Disabling and Disfiguring Diseases

New York, NY (March 20, 2015) --- Helen Keller International ([HKI](#)) is pleased to announce that it has entered a \$35-million cooperative agreement with the United States Agency for International Development ([USAID](#)) to lead a five-year project aimed at managing and preventing the related disability and disfigurement of two neglected tropical diseases – blinding trachoma and lymphatic filariasis (elephantiasis). This assistance is from the American people, and Burkina Faso, Cameroon and Ethiopia are among its primary beneficiaries.

Trachoma is an infectious bacterial disease that eventually can cause in-turned eyelashes which continually scrape the globe of the eye, a condition known as trichiasis. Trichiasis can cause excruciating pain and lead to blindness if not addressed. Trichiasis can be reversed and, thus, sight can be preserved and pain alleviated through a simple eyelid surgery. Lymphatic filariasis, also known as elephantiasis, is caused by parasitic worms which create a fluid imbalance, leading to massive swelling of the arms, legs, or genitals, and a painful thickening of the skin. Both conditions are widespread in the developing world, especially in Africa, and are associated with poverty and poor access to healthcare, resulting in economic losses of many billions of dollars a year and extreme social isolation due to stigma. Surgery can be conducted to treat the scrotal swelling, and proper care of the affected limb can reduce and prevent further complications of the lymphedema.

The Morbidity Management and Disability Prevention for Blinding Trachoma and Lymphatic Filariasis (MMDP) Project, as the initiative is officially known, is an unprecedented commitment by USAID to address the morbidity associated with these two diseases. Since 2006, USAID has supported countries in Africa, Asia, and the Americas to achieve their elimination goals for trachoma and lymphatic filariasis through the interruption of disease transmission using mass drug administration. The MMDP Project is unique and complementary, in that it seeks to concurrently achieve morbidity elimination goals set by the World Health Organization for trachoma and lymphatic filariasis by assisting Burkina Faso, Cameroon and Ethiopia in planning, implementing, and monitoring the scale-up of high-quality surgical and limb care services for affected individuals.

Ethiopia is recognized as having the highest burden of trichiasis in sub-Saharan Africa with an estimated 650,000 cases. In Burkina Faso, it is estimated that well over 35,000 people suffer from trichiasis with another 20,000 people affected in the northern regions of Cameroon. Without corrective surgery, people living with trichiasis are at risk of becoming irreversibly blind. Estimates of the morbidity associated with lymphatic filariasis will be collected in all three countries at the start of the MMDP Project, as the disease burden is currently unknown.

“We are grateful to USAID for its generous funding of this important life-changing initiative that reinforces the United States Government’s support of programs to combat neglected tropical diseases, and furthers their longstanding commitment to the elimination of two scourges of poverty, trachoma and lymphatic filariasis,” said [Kathy Spahn](#), the President and CEO of Helen

Keller International, which this year celebrates its 100th anniversary. “These diseases can be eliminated. We have seen so right here in the United States, where trachoma was a problem until the early 1950’s when it was eliminated, thanks in part to improved sanitation and overall living conditions. With the right kind of support, huge progress can be made. Mali and Niger used to be among the countries with the highest trachoma burden in Africa. But, thanks to the work of HKI and others in partnership with national authorities, both countries are likely to achieve trachoma elimination before the global elimination date of 2020.”

Helen Keller International is leading the MMDP Project consortium which includes the African Filariasis Morbidity Project, the Kilimanjaro Centre for Community Ophthalmology, and the Research Triangle Institute International. Over the next five years, the MMDP Project is expected to make a significant impact by supporting these selected countries to treat these debilitating illnesses, aiding access to trainings for local health workers, and promoting internationally recognized preferred practices. HKI and its partners will also help the countries improve their data capture, monitoring and evaluation systems, and offer global leadership to the MMDP community.

“The MMDP Project will provide the countries with the tools and knowledge they need to give a new chance at life for those who are suffering,” said Emily Toubali, the Director of the Morbidity Management and Disability Prevention Project at Helen Keller International. “It will also foster cross-country learning and develop lessons-learned and preferred practices for the benefit of other countries and the global community.”

Experts Available for Interviews

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About Helen Keller International

Founded in 1915, Helen Keller International’s mission is to save the sight and lives of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged. HKI combats the causes and consequences of blindness and malnutrition by establishing programs based on evidence and research in vision, health, and nutrition. Visit <http://www.hki.org> for more information.

About USAID

USAID is a global leader in large-scale implementation of integrated treatment programs for NTDs, focusing on the scale-up of mass drug administration to target the control and/or elimination of lymphatic filariasis, blinding trachoma, onchocerciasis, schistosomiasis, and intestinal worms. The program currently supports 25 countries and regional programs in Africa, Asia, and the Americas to reach treatment targets and to monitor and evaluate the programs to document achievement of control and elimination goals. Visit <http://www.neglecteddiseases.gov/> for more information.