Preventing a double threat
Supporting the Global Fund’s response to COVID-19.

The COVID-19 pandemic is jeopardising progress made on tuberculosis (TB), HIV and malaria, affecting countries’ ability to carry out routine medical care and diagnosis, and setting the world further off-target to end the three diseases by 2030. The secondary impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic – overwhelmed health systems and disrupted routine services – are likely to cause more deaths than the virus itself, hitting the most vulnerable the hardest. The Global Fund to Fight AIDS, TB and Malaria is well placed to work with many lower- and middle-income countries, to support their response to COVID-19 and to mitigate disruption to existing programmes to fight the three diseases. But this isn’t possible without additional funding. The UK Government now has an opportunity to join other countries and channel a portion of their COVID-19 response through the Global Fund, so that it can use its existing infrastructure to efficiently respond to the pandemic, whilst being able to minimise the knock-on effects of the new disease and continue its vital work. Support for this kind of international collaboration is needed from across the political spectrum, to help end the pandemic and prevent millions of additional deaths from TB, HIV and malaria.

Ending the epidemics

Ending TB, HIV and malaria is one of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) the international community has committed to achieving by 2030. With only ten years left to meet this ambitious target, the COVID-19 crisis may reverse progress on a huge scale.

People and communities affected by TB, HIV and malaria face a double threat and are at serious risk of being left behind. People with compromised immune systems or lung problems may be even more vulnerable if they become infected with COVID-19. But COVID-19 has a second and potentially more deadly impact, overwhelming health systems and disrupting existing services aimed at preventing and treating TB, HIV and malaria, with a knock-on effect on mortality and infection rates and threatening recent advances in health.

It is estimated that if efforts are not made to mitigate and overcome interruptions in health services and supplies during the COVID-19 pandemic, deaths from HIV could increase by 40% over five years in sub-Saharan Africa; there could be an 11% increase in the number of TB cases, taking the number of cases back to the levels they were in 2013; and there could be a doubling in the number of malaria deaths in sub-Saharan Africa this year compared to 2018.

COVID-19 and TB

TB is the leading cause of death from infectious disease worldwide, with nearly 10 million people affected and 1.5 million deaths in 2018. We know that people suffering with and susceptible to contracting TB are often vulnerable or marginalised groups, such as people who are malnourished, homeless, living with HIV or living in poverty and without easy access to healthcare.

Due to ‘lock-downs’ aimed at curbing the spread of COVID-19, many people with TB are experiencing problems accessing the medicine they need, and are left unable to attend clinics due to closures and travel restrictions. India, which is home to the largest number of TB cases in the world, has already seen an 80% drop in the number of cases being reported, meaning that many people remain undiagnosed and are more likely pass on the infection to others.

Bleak predictions are being made as to the extent to which the pandemic could reverse progress made towards ending TB in the long term. A new modelling report shows that a 3-month lock-down (where no TB services are able to operate), followed by a 10-month period of gradually restoring services, could lead to an additional 6.3 million cases of TB between 2020 and 2025, and an additional 1.4 million TB deaths during this time. This is owing to multiple factors, including the re-purposing of parts of national funds and health
systems, such as clinics, medical staff, diagnostic tools and equipment usually needed for TB treatment.

What can the Global Fund do?

**The Global Fund to Fight AIDS, TB and Malaria**, the largest multilateral funder of health systems worldwide, is providing immediate funding of up to US $1 billion to help countries fight COVID-19, to mitigate its impact on lifesaving HIV, TB and malaria programmes, and to prevent fragile health systems from being overwhelmed. It is working with health leaders, partners and governments to ensure the global response to COVID-19 includes lessons learned from the fight against HIV, TB and malaria, including addressing stigma and discrimination, fighting gender barriers to health, engaging communities in the response, and ensuring a fair allocation of resources.

Countries have been offered flexibility to use up to 5% of their existing Global Fund grants to fight COVID-19 and adapt their HIV, TB and malaria programmes. Up to US $500 million is available, and the Global Fund is encouraging countries to redeploy assets from existing grants, for example, to help fund pandemic preparedness assessments, laboratory testing, surveillance infrastructure, infection control in health facilities, and information campaigns.

In addition, the Fund’s ‘**COVID-19 Response Mechanism**’ (CRM19) also allows countries to apply for extra funding to reinforce their response to the pandemic. It has an initial allocation of US $500 million, and is an effective channel for funds for both the COVID-19 response and for quickly adapting programmes for the three diseases to operate effectively in the new environment. Countries can request new funding for COVID-19 control and containment, including laboratory networks, supply chains, and engagement with vulnerable communities.

**Support for international collaboration**

The UK Government already supports the work of the Global Fund, and last year’s strong pledge of £1.4 billion over three years showed that it is committed to ending HIV, TB and malaria by 2030. It has also more recently stepped up to be at the heart of global efforts to curb the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and improve global health for future generations, through its investments in COVID-19 vaccine research and development, by co-hosting the EU Coronavirus Global Response Summit and its ambitious five-year pledge to Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance.

With new data available on how the pandemic will jeopardise work being done to fight other infectious diseases, now is the time to make the Government aware of the risks of responding to COVID-19 in a siloed way, without considering wider health systems benefits. It is also vital to show there is political support for the UK to increase its funding to fight the potentially huge secondary impacts of COVID-19 on TB, HIV and malaria programmes, and that the Global Fund’s COVID-19 Response Mechanism provides an effective way to do this, helping to ensure that years of progress fighting the three diseases will not be lost.

Grassroots advocates can help by showing there is support around the country and across Parliament for the UK to play its part in funding CRM19. Doing so will help shore up systems for health, respond to COVID-19, and mitigate the impact on HIV, TB and malaria programmes. This month, please arrange a virtual meeting with your MP to discuss this issue. Please ask them to write to the Secretary of State, the Rt. Hon. Anne-Marie Trevelyan MP, outlining your concerns about the impact of COVID-19 on TB programmes and making the case for investing in CRM19.

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**Take action!**

This month, please arrange an online or telephone meeting with your MP during the RESULTS Week of Action (22-25 June), outlining the impact that COVID-19 is having on progress to end infectious diseases TB, HIV and malaria. You can find your MP’s contact details [here](#), and advice on arranging a virtual meeting in the [June Background Sheet](#).

Ask your MP to write a letter to the Secretary of State for International Development, the Rt. Hon. Anne-Marie Trevelyan MP asking that she supports investing in CRM-19.

Let us know that you’ve taken action by emailing Dela at [dela.anderson@results.org.uk](mailto:dela.anderson@results.org.uk).