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Geneva | 20 March 2014 – Almost half a million people fell ill with multidrug-resistant tuberculosis (MDR-TB) in 2012, yet less than one in 4 of these people was diagnosed, mainly due to a lack of access to quality diagnostic services.

But with an innovative international project, 27 countries are making promising progress in diagnosing MDR-TB, says the World Health Organization (WHO) in the lead-up to World TB Day, 24 March.

The project known as EXPAND-TB (Expanding Access to New Diagnostics for TB), financed by UNITAID, helped to triple the number of MDR-TB cases diagnosed in participating countries.

“Earlier and faster diagnosis of all forms of TB is vital,” says Dr Margaret Chan, WHO’s Director-General. “It improves the chances of people getting the right treatment and being cured, and it helps stop spread of drug-resistant disease.”

The theme for World TB Day 2014 is “Reach the 3 Million”. One third of the estimated 9 million people falling ill with TB each year do not get the care they need. In many countries, it is hard for people to access diagnostic services – particularly for MDR-TB. Some countries have only one central laboratory, which often has limited capacity to diagnose MDR-TB. In some cases, patient samples have to be sent to other countries for testing. Moreover, traditional diagnostic tests can take more than 2 months to get results.

But the situation is beginning to change. New technologies can rapidly diagnose TB and drug-resistant TB in as little as two hours.

“The MDR-TB story is being transformed by a fertile mix of collaborators, including those working on access to diagnosis,” says Philippe Meunier, the French Government’s Ambassador for the fight against HIV/AIDS and communicable diseases. “Increased capacity and reduced prices mean more patients can be served, and global health risks would be diminished.”

In 2009, UNITAID provided US$ 87 million to support the EXPAND-TB multi-partner project to enable effective and sustained access, and use of recommended new TB diagnostic technologies in 27 low- and middle-income countries. These countries together carry 40% of the estimated global MDR-TB burden.

The project has delivered impressive results. Over 30% of the MDR-TB cases detected globally in 2012 were from EXPAND-TB countries. 90% of India’s detected MDR-TB cases were through EXPAND-TB supported services. Use of these tests requires strengthened laboratory services. By the end of 2013, 92 laboratories were fully operational. From 2009 to 2013, the number of MDR-TB cases diagnosed in the 27 countries tripled, with 36 000 diagnosed in 2013 alone.

The project has enabled more patients to be treated with quality-assured second-line TB medicines. Through that demand, the project has helped to reduce the price of individual medicines and MDR-TB treatment regimens by one third. Prices have also dropped for diagnostic commodities.

Project partners are WHO and the Global Laboratory Initiative (GLI), the Stop TB Partnership's Global Drug Facility and FIND. Project funds have been used to purchase testing equipment and commodities, and to train laboratory technicians.

The EXPAND-TB project complements investments in laboratory infrastructure and diagnostic services from international partners, including The Global Fund to Fight AIDS, TB and Malaria, The World Bank and the United States Government.

"The gap in access to TB diagnostics and care is far from filled, but is narrowing. With the impetus of modern laboratories, we are on the right track finally to handle MDR-TB," says Dr Mario Raviglione, Director of WHO's Global TB Programme.

Ministries of health are now working on securing domestic funding for the medium-term and working with partners to fill financing shortfalls for quality diagnostic tests and services.

Note to editors:

EXPAND-TB Partners, and additional quotes from participants in the 20 March press briefing:

WHO is the directing and coordinating authority for health within the United Nations system. It is responsible for providing leadership on global health matters, shaping the health research agenda, setting norms and standards, articulating evidence-based policy options, providing technical support to countries and monitoring and assessing health trends.

UNITAID is a global health initiative launched in 2006 by the Governments of Brazil, Chile, France, Norway and the United Kingdom to provide sustainable funding for the fight against HIV/AIDS, malaria and tuberculosis. About 70% of UNITAID's funds come from a small levy on airline tickets. Through implementers, UNITAID finances the purchase of quality-assured drugs and diagnostics for patients in poor countries, using its market power to expand supply, promote development of new and better products, cut delivery lead times and reduce prices.
Dr Philippe Duneton, Executive Director a.i., UNITAID said, "The EXPAND-TB project has been an important part of UNITAID's TB investment portfolio as identifying cases has been, and remains, essential. To reach the missing three million, we must continue to find and use ever-better diagnostics technologies, but also enable access for low and middle income countries to the new medicines now available."

The Stop TB Partnership's Global Drug Facility (GDF) coordinates and manages procurement

and delivery of TB commodities like quality assured medicines, diagnostic equipment and supplies to eligible countries, offering as well technical assistance for building more sustainable supply chain systems. The GDF has procured and distributed diagnostics and laboratory equipment for the project and, by pooling the global demand for Second Line anti-TB Drugs within one single procurement platform, has reached up to 32% cost reduction for MDR-TB treatment, bringing a broader basis of suppliers producing quality assured medicines and allowing more market competition.
“We need to ensure that diagnostics are accessible and closer to people. This project is a successful multi-partner strategic approach where diagnostic, treatment capacity and medicines supply have been linked together, showing the path for a stronger fight against MDR-TB " said Dr Joel Keravec, GDF Special Advisor.

FIND is an international non-profit organization that drives development and delivery of innovative diagnostic solutions for poverty-related diseases. As the main implementing partner for EXPAND-TB, FIND works closely with national TB programmes and multiple international and local partners to build laboratory capacity, accelerate uptake and establish the know-how needed for correct use of new TB technologies. FIND helps ensure that all the key components that are needed for successful diagnostic implementation are put in place, and aims to maximise patient impact.
Dr Catharina Boehme, FIND’s Chief Executive Officer, said “Without diagnostics, medicine is blind. The EXPAND TB project is critical for scaling up the capacity to detect TB drug resistance. It has also laid the ground for rapid uptake and proper use of future diagnostic innovations that are urgently needed to effectively fight TB and drug resistance. Continued commitment from the global health community in support of new tools, especially point-of-care diagnostics, should remain a high priority.”