

Towards a strategic plan for the elimination of soil-transmitted helminths in children within the WHO European Region

Dr. Claudia Wendland, WECF

Soil-transmitted helminth (STH), commonly called intestinal worms, continue to exercise a significant health burden. Worldwide WHO estimates that there are more than one billion cases of parasitic intestinal worm infections. STH infections in children are one major cause for malnutrition, growth stunting, intellectual retardation, as well as cognitive and educational deficits. An additional 44 million infected pregnant women suffer significant morbidity and contributory mortality due to hookworm-associated anemia. **In the pan-European region WHO estimates that more than four million children are in need of preventive chemotherapy (PCT).** Although the Member States benefit from the support of the pharmaceutical industry in the form of free antihelminthic medication, **additional effort is needed in the areas of water, sanitation and hygiene(WASH) to break the infectious cycle of STH.** Such action is in line with the priority goals announced in the 4th and 5th Ministerial Conferences on Environment and Health, and with the stated aims of the Protocol on Water and Health to the 1992 Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes (“the Protocol”).

WHO/ECEH is in charge to develop a “Strategic Action Plan for Control and Prevention of Soil-transmitted Helminths in pre- and school-aged children in the European region” and therefore organized a workshop in Bonn on 17-18 December 2012 to set the regional strategy for preventing parasitic intestinal worm infections. Representatives of 14 countries of the pan-European Region attended the workshop. WECF’s advisors for water and sanitation, Margriet Samwel and Claudia Wendland, were invited to share their experiences from the region and to exchange information on possible contribution from civil society especially related to the WASH sector.

The representatives of the pan-European countries welcomed very much that WHO starts to raise profile for STH as it is a neglected and underestimated burden in the region. There is also a lack of medical STH parasitologists because it is not considered as an attractive discipline.

WECF emphasized the need to improve the WASH infrastructure in the region as recent studies showed the clear link between STH and WASH, see Ziegelbauer et al (2012) (<http://www.plosmedicine.org/article/info%3Adoi%2F10.1371%2Fjournal.pmed.1001162>) and Ejemot-Nwadiaro et al. (2009). The “Fit for School” programme on hygiene education http://www.pegnet.ifwkiel.de/activities/events/presentations2011/pegnet_presentation_benzian.pdf in the Philippines demonstrates that the number of STH cases among children could be halved.

Participants reported a number of data on STH cases in the different countries but do usually not a comprehensive overview of the prevalence in the country. A study in Kyrgyzstan showed that the number of real STH cases is 10 times higher than the number of patients who are going to health care and are thus registered. It means that the current data reported by health authorities are tremendous underestimates of the real situation of STH prevalence.

Shinee Enkhtsetseg, WHO/ECEH, mentioned a new study by **WHO/HSE/WSH** http://www.who.int/water_sanitation_health/publications/2012/global_costs/en/index.html **about the economic benefit of WASH** showing that the cost benefit ratio of interventions into WASH is 4.3 globally. Although investments into the WASH sector seems to be high, there will be an economic return for the society. She also reminded the link to the Parma commitments where one indicator is the improvement of WASH conditions in schools in the pan-European Region and the link to the post-MDG discussion on indicators for water and sanitation. The European countries are advised to combine efforts for the different initiatives to foster action towards STH elimination and to apply synergy effects.

Three countries are the first to be evaluated related to the STH prevalence and WASH situation: Moldova, Romania and Turkey. Missions take place in December 2012, January and February 2013. WECF contributes to the evaluation of the WASH component in Romania and Turkey.

For more information about the Strategic plan on STH elimination:

http://www.unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/env/documents/2012/wat/WG_on_Water_and_Health/5th_WG_on_Water_and_Health/Info4_Helminthinformation_paper_WHO.pdf