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The Clock Is Running Out: Let's Team Up and Say No to NTDs

10 December 2018

By: **Didier Drogba**

As the African continent and the entire world celebrate the 100th birthday of the great Nelson Mandela with the 2018 Global Citizen Festival: Mandela 100 on December 2, I think about the incredible legacy of a man who I was blessed to call "Daddy." Every day, I am inspired by

Madiba to continue speaking out for the downtrodden and make sure that all people get a fair shot at a better life.

Creating a better life for ourselves and our children requires two essential things: education and health care. Without knowledge, we can't reach our full potential. And without good health, we can't go to school, hold a job or be a productive member of society.

Over the years, I've committed myself to bringing greater access to educational opportunities and health care to my fellow Africans. I've learned about the forces that put people's well-being at risk and have worked to combat them through my foundation. What I've recently discovered is that one of the most persistent threats confronting Africans today is a group of diseases known as Neglected Tropical Diseases (NTDs).

NTDs haven't received a lot of attention in the past, even though they affect 1.5 billion people around the world and about 600 million people in Africa. These diseases are devastating, causing blindness, severe disfigurement, chronic pain, physical and mental disabilities, and even death. They interfere with adults' ability to work and kids' ability to go to school and grow up strong and healthy. NTDs impact the poorest, most remote, most vulnerable of our communities—those without access to clean water, safe sanitation and health care—making it even harder to end the cycle of poverty.

But this situation is finally changing. African nations are now putting their focus on eliminating these debilitating diseases once and for all. Government officials are joining with philanthropic organizations, donor countries and pharmaceutical companies to raise awareness of

NTDs, make preventive measures and treatments more accessible, and gather the funds needed to fight them. The World Health Organization created the Expanded Special Project for the Elimination of Neglected Tropical Diseases (ESPEN) to lead the charge against NTDs and bring life-changing medicines to those who are most at risk. The government of Belgium has just announced their partnership with the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to support of ESPEN's mission and contribute to the regional fight against NTDs.

Already, we've scored some major wins. With the help of \$17.8 billion in drug donations from major pharmaceutical companies around the globe, 1 billion people have received treatment for a least one NTD. Last year, Togo became the first country in sub-Saharan Africa to eliminate lymphatic filariasis, and this year Ghana eliminated trachoma. By redoubling our efforts and maintaining our focus, more African nations can achieve similar results.

In my career as a soccer player, I learned that the only way to win a match is for every member of the team to work together and play their part. That's why I'm encouraging everyone to step up and join Speak Up Africa and its No to NTDs campaign. No to NTDs is designed to ensure all parties play their role in the fight against these diseases. It focuses on getting elected officials to prioritize NTDs and accelerate progress toward controlling and ultimately eliminating them. It works to make sure sufficient funds are dedicated to the fight, both from the public and private sectors. And it educates the general public—including local leaders, teachers, business owners, parents and children—about these diseases so they can do whatever it takes to stop them in their tracks.

I am honored to join this fight and bring my voice to this important cause. My hope is that I, along with other athletes, can use the No to NTDs campaign to shine a light on these devastating diseases and show that they are both preventable and treatable. I also want to call on governments and institutions to use their power to combat NTDs. We simply cannot let our guard down for a single moment. We must press on and ensure that all people—no matter where they live or how much money they have—get access to the health care they need and deserve.

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