World Health Organization Executive Board Meeting 154

As the governance body of the World Health Organization (WHO) meets next week for the 154th session of the Executive Board (EB)—which features agenda items on immunization, tuberculosis (TB), neglected tropical diseases (NTDs), and antimicrobial resistance (AMR)—the Global Health Technologies Coalition (GHTC) urges policymakers to prioritize the following actions to strengthen health research and development (R&D) to address these urgent health challenges:

9. Immunization Agenda 2030

The COVID-19 pandemic and a wide range of other environmental and geopolitical challenges have had a highly damaging impact on immunization. Millions of additional young children (and adolescents and adults) are now at risk of life-threatening, vaccine-preventable diseases. The WHO report outlines the need to speed access to new tools as part of its recommendations.

GHTC calls on:

- Member states to accelerate new vaccine introduction and promote implementation of vaccines recommended by WHO where they have yet to be introduced, particularly in low- and middle-income countries, through enhanced global collaboration in effort to address research gaps and accelerate vaccine development.

- Member states to facilitate the development of a comprehensive global immunization research framework that outlines priority areas, fosters collaboration, and guides research efforts to support the goals of the Immunization Agenda 2030.

10. End TB Strategy

The central message of the EB End TB Strategy report highlights that despite reaching the midpoint in the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals, global progress towards agreed milestones for ending TB remains off target. To get back on track, WHO and member states will have to refocus their efforts, reinvest in R&D, and accelerate the development of new tools in the fight against TB.

GHTC calls on:

- Member states to substantially increase investments in TB research to drive technological breakthroughs and strategies to support the rapid uptake of innovations. Member states must mobilize domestic resources to expand the pipeline of new and equitably accessible TB tools for all populations, including pregnant people and children, especially true point-of-care molecular diagnostics, new shorter-course treatment regimens to treat drug-resistant forms of TB, and vaccines.
    - This is a critical moment as a number of TB vaccines are entering late-stage clinical development and will need prompt, substantial investment to ensure efficient and thorough assessment. A new vaccine would be a game changer in epidemic control and is critical for addressing growing rates of AMR by reducing the need for antibiotics. The Treatment Action Group reports global TB R&D investment of US$1 billion in 2021 and 2022, far below the United Nations target of $5 billion per year by 2027. In order to meet this $5 billion annual target,

member states must increase their investments in TB R&D to at least 0.15 percent of their respective gross domestic expenditure on R&D.

- Member states to address the unmet needs in translational research for TB. The pandemic has demonstrated that rapid sharing of data helps accelerate research and discovery. Some countries have already made strides by using common protocols coordinated through the Regional Prospective Observational Research for Tuberculosis (RePORT) International network and contributing data and biospecimens to the platform. Member states should double down and push for additional coordination and collaboration through these platforms.

- WHO to continue to support the implementation of the End TB Strategy with adequate stakeholder engagement through relevant WHO programs, as well as the recently launched Global Strategy for TB Research and Innovation, to provide crucial capacity-building and implementation research support to countries.

11. Road map for neglected tropical diseases 2021–2030

The WHO report on the NTD 2021-2030 roadmap highlights that WHO and countries continue to lag in implementing the framework due to the pandemic. Key strategic priorities will be to facilitate the development and introduction of new medicines and diagnostics and to leverage efficiency gains in integrating approaches across diseases.

GHTC calls on:

- Member states to sustain and expand investments to accelerate R&D of safe and affordable treatments for NTDs and improved diagnostics, particularly for NTDs with specific unmet needs for use in primary healthcare settings.
    - It is essential to address the current diagnostic gaps for NTDs through sustainable financing mechanisms and targeted innovation. The Diagnostic Technical Advisory Group for Neglected Tropical Diseases recently published a number of target product profiles, but more guidance and support from WHO and key technical partners will be necessary to spur the development of new diagnostic tools. We urge WHO and member states to work together to explore regulatory and manufacturing pathways to facilitate the simultaneous or aligned prequalification and regulatory approval processes of in-vitro diagnostics to accelerate market access.

- WHO and member states to develop a global action plan for the second half of the implementation period of the road map (2025–2030), including a timeline of activities required to achieve the set targets, defined roles and responsibilities, and forecasted costs. In addition, all stakeholders should:
    - Support South-South R&D collaboration models where countries impacted by NTDs lead R&D priority-setting and research activities.
    - Ensure that strategies to combat NTDs, including development and availability of health tools, feature in climate adaptation discussions and planning, as many NTDs are climate sensitive.
    - Address regional disparities in NTDs by tailoring interventions to the specific needs and challenges faced by different regions, with a focus on countries with limited access and resources.

- WHO to work with regional bodies like the Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention and the Pan American Health Organization to coordinate the production and oversight of a strategic stockpile of vaccines and diagnostics for both NTDs and emerging infectious diseases.

13. Antimicrobial resistance: Accelerating national and global responses

The EB report highlights the need for comprehensive measures to promote increased R&D targeted to the greatest public health needs; the introduction of programmatic innovations such as genomic surveillance, point-of-care diagnostics, and digital health solutions; and regional and global mechanisms to overcome pipeline, production, distribution, and access bottlenecks. With the United Nations (UN) High-Level Meeting (HLM) on AMR later this year, WHO and member states have a unique opportunity to reaffirm their commitment to combating this silent pandemic.

GHTC calls on:

- All member states to increase investment and innovation in quality-assured, new, and improved antimicrobials, novel compounds, diagnostics, vaccines, and other health technologies to fight AMR. Innovations should be developed with the most vulnerable populations in mind and be appropriate and consistently accessible to all who need them, including to those in low-resource settings.

- Member states to enroll in the Global Antimicrobial Resistance and Use Surveillance System (GLASS) and ensure that surveillance and diagnostic data is shared with WHO, as the program serves as a vital platform for countries to rapidly access crucial information to respond to disease outbreaks.

- WHO and the Quadripartite, which is composed of other UN agencies, to hold an open and inclusive consultation process for the development of the Quadripartite joint policy/technical brief on AMR priorities, which is anticipated to be released ahead of the UN HLM on AMR in 2024.

- WHO and member states to develop and implement the AMR Diagnostic Initiative with its four building blocks, in line with World Health Assembly resolution WHA76.5 on strengthening diagnostics capacity. Through this initiative, a Global AMR Laboratory Network should be established and sustained, aimed at strengthening global capacity for both AMR surveillance and patient management, with external quality assessment programs and a standardized WHO accreditation process.