

# Report on TDR Stakeholders' Meeting on Neglected Tropical Diseases

*Bangkok, Thailand, 23 June 2010*



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Organized and co-sponsored by the  
WHO Regional Office for South-East Asia  
in collaboration with the  
Special Programme for Research and Training in Tropical Diseases (TDR)

Hosted by Mahidol University, Thailand  
at the Imperial Queen's Park Hotel, Bangkok



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## 1. Meeting summary

The Tropical Diseases Research (TDR) South-East Asia Regional Consultation on Neglected Tropical Diseases (NTD) Research was held on 23 June 2010 in Bangkok, Thailand. It was organized and co-sponsored by the WHO Regional Office for South-East Asia, and the WHO/UNDP/UNICEF Special Programme for Research and Training in Tropical Diseases (TDR), and hosted by Mahidol University, Thailand.

Over 35 participants representing a range of different constituencies including the WHO Regional Office for South-East Asia and country offices, WHO/TDR, ministries of health and public health, research institutes, the academic sector and donor organizations attended. TDR's new strategy and activities were presented, as well as perspectives on research in neglected tropical diseases (NTD) in the South-East Asia Region were presented.

Although the meeting did not include all relevant constituencies, it was successful in identifying a number of current challenges, as well as opportunities for partners and stakeholders to harmonize their activities and collaborate more closely towards more efficient research on NTD in the Region.

## 2. Background and rationale

TDR has recently developed a new vision and strategy,<sup>1</sup> responding to fresh challenges linked with the changing global research environment. As part of this new strategy, TDR has taken on a "stewardship" role to contribute to strengthening research on infectious diseases affecting poor populations, by acting as a facilitator and knowledge manager.

This includes activities to support progress analysis, needs assessment, priority identification and advocacy. TDR also aims to provide a neutral platform for partners to share experiences and to discuss opportunities for

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.who.int/tdr/documents/TDR-10-year-vision.pdf>

active collaboration and harmonization of research activities relating to infectious diseases of poverty. As part of this role, TDR has placed high priority on the establishment and facilitation of consultations to engage key stakeholders.

Against this background, TDR, in collaboration with the WHO Regional Office for South-East Asia (SEARO) and Mahidol University, Thailand, organized a regional consultation on neglected tropical diseases (NTDs) with important stakeholders working in the Region. This consultation was held in Bangkok, Thailand, on 23 June 2010. The agenda of the meeting is provided in Annexure 1 and the list of participants in Annexure 2.

The principal objectives of the meeting were:

- To seek stakeholders' inputs on the concept and framework for the new TDR activities, including the TDR Global Report for Research on Infectious Diseases of Poverty.
- To share and exchange good practices, experiences and lessons learnt from infectious diseases research and control undertaken in the Region.
- To identify priority research and capacity needs in the Region related to infectious diseases of poverty.
- To highlight achievements and opportunities for advocacy to support research and the utilization of research outputs on infectious diseases in the Region.
- To identify areas of collaboration between stakeholders in the Region in order to harmonize activities and utilize available resources efficiently.
- To discuss the challenges and opportunities for resources.

Significantly, the consultation followed a Neglected Tropical Diseases Partners' meeting for the South-East Asia Region hosted by SEARO on 21-22 June 2010 in Bangkok. This meeting reviewed progress in NTD elimination/eradication and confirmed commitments by partners for future work. A special edition of the *Bulletin of the World Health Organization* with the theme of "Communicable diseases in South-East Asia" had also been published in March 2010<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> Bulletin of the World Health Organization, 88 (3), March 2010, 161-240.

### 3. Opening session

In his opening remarks, Professor Pratap Singhasivnon, Dean of the Faculty of Tropical Medicine, Mahidol University, welcomed the participants, and emphasized the importance of sustained partnerships for progress against NTDs in the South-East Asia Region. He also highlighted the need to harmonize stakeholders' activities and to utilize resources efficiently towards the goal of eradication/elimination of NTDs.

Dr Chusak Prasittisuk, Co-ordinator, Communicable Diseases Control, WHO-SEARO, emphasized the continuing role of NTDs in the South-East Asia Region in contributing to extreme poverty. Good progress had been made towards elimination/eradication of four targeted diseases (leprosy, lymphatic filariasis, kala-azar and yaws) through regional agreements. However, progress had been slow in some respects, and the re-emergence of diseases such as chikungunya remained a concern. Elimination/eradication of NTDs is not only important for individual countries to consider, but is crucially a regional and global concern. Dr Chusak stressed the need for effective partnerships and the importance of the consultation in building such partnerships.

Professor Pratap and Dr Chusak highlighted the productive links established between TDR, Mahidol University and SEARO over many years, and gratefully acknowledged TDR contributions in supporting research and capacity-building in the Region.

The objectives of the meeting and the expected outcomes were presented by Dr Chusak and Dr Shenglan Tang.

### 4. Session 1: Introduction Chair: Prof. Pratap Singhasivanon

***TDR's new 10-year Vision and Strategy with an emphasis on Stewardship: Dr Shenglan Tang, Scientist, TDR***

TDR's new vision and strategy was formulated in response to critical changes in the global environment for research on infectious diseases,

including epidemiological changes, disparities between funding and disease burden, increasingly complex and fragmented funding, and the need for greater involvement of disease-endemic countries in decision-making on research.

The new TDR vision for the next 10 years is “to foster an effective global research effort on infectious diseases of poverty in which disease-endemic countries play a pivotal role”. In order to achieve this new vision, TDR is using a three-pronged strategy through: (i) stewardship for research on infectious diseases of poverty, helping harmonize global research efforts and facilitate agenda-setting; (ii) empowerment of researchers from disease-endemic countries as research leaders; and (iii) support for research on neglected priority needs.

In its stewardship role TDR is functioning as a facilitator and knowledge manager to support stakeholders in assessment of research needs, priority identification, agenda setting, and advocacy for research on infectious diseases of poverty. It also aims to provide a neutral platform for stakeholders to discuss and harmonize their activities, with participation and pivotal roles for institutions and decision-makers from disease-endemic countries. National and regional consultations have been organized to engage key stakeholders in this process.

The stewardship function of TDR plans to produce two major resources for the community, namely the knowledge management platform (TropIKA.net) for sharing information, and the Global Report for Research on Infectious Diseases of Poverty. An international High Level Advocacy Group is also being developed to facilitate advocacy for infectious disease research priorities focusing on disease-endemic countries.

***Strategic framework for research in communicable diseases in the WHO South-East Asia Region: Dr S. K. Bhattacharya, WHO-SEARO, New Delhi***

Dr Bhattacharya reported on WHO-SEARO’s approach to supporting and promoting research in communicable diseases in the Region. Research and development is regarded as critical for effective control, elimination and eradication of NTDs in the region, providing an evidence base for policy development, helping in the formulation of strategies and interventions, and evaluation of the impact of these strategies and interventions. A TDR unit has been created for promoting and coordinating NTD research in the SEA Region.

The strategic plan for research in the South-East Asia Region is aimed at reversing the trend of communicable diseases, improving the quality of life, and contributing towards achieving the Millennium Development Goals and poverty reduction in the coming decade. The guiding principles of the plan are: (i) prioritization for maximum impact on health and socioeconomic development; (ii) consensus building through regional technical advisory groups; (iii) integrated and collaborative approaches between countries; and (iv) interdepartmental collaborations.

The objectives of the plan are to promote research, develop capacity, disseminate research-related information, and promote appropriate research management to the highest ethical standards. Strategic action areas have been identified towards achieving the plan objectives. WHO collaborating centres have an important role to play within this plan.

Each unit of the Communicable Diseases (CDS) Department in WHO-SEARO is responsible for identifying priority areas and allocating funds. Emphasis is placed on monitoring and evaluation of research projects, promoting the use of research to influence policy, and supporting research to introduce new tools into programmes. The CDS department will allocate 5% of the annual budget of each unit to provide seed funding for research projects, with additional funds being sought from other agencies. The SEARO/TDR Small Grants Programme (US\$ 75000/grant) has been successful in promoting research in endemic countries, focusing on control-oriented operational research in communicable diseases.

## **5. Session 2: TDR stewardship-related activities**

### **Chair: Dr S. Tang, TDR, WHO-HQ**

***Overview of TDR expert reference groups: Objectives, expected outputs and implementation activities, including stakeholder's consultations at country level: Dr S. Tang, TDR Stewardship (businessline-1)***

Ten expert reference groups have been established as part of the TDR stewardship programme to provide a strategic analytical framework for progress analysis, needs assessment and priority identification for research on infectious diseases of poverty. Six groups are disease-specific in their focus, and four are thematic to ensure that critical cross-cutting issues such

as health systems, social sciences, innovation platforms and environmental factors are given appropriate consideration.

Each group is hosted by the WHO country or Regional Office, and includes 10-12 international experts, with strong representation from disease-endemic countries to ensure the relevance of the conclusions to the most affected countries and regions. Together, these reference groups represent a research “think tank” for infectious diseases of poverty, including more than 125 experts. Annual meetings are held in countries, linked with national stakeholder consultations. Reports from each reference group will be made available as resources, and will also provide a foundation for the forthcoming TDR *Global Report on Research on Infectious Diseases of Poverty*.

***Environment, climate change and infectious diseases:***

***Professor C.P. Ramachandran***

Professor C.P. Ramachandran outlined the important links between environmental changes and a rise in the incidence of new and previously suppressed infectious diseases. Destruction of natural habitats, for example through agriculture, mining, and road and dam building, are creating conditions for new routes of transmission of infectious diseases, particularly among wild animals, humans and domesticated animals.

Climate change, societal factors, urbanization and international travel are other major factors driving the emergence and spread of infectious diseases. Contact between fruit bats and domesticated pigs, resulted in the Nipah virus outbreak in Malaysia in 1999, leading to fatal infections in humans, and a major economic impact on the swine industry. Several new infectious diseases are being identified every few years, and integrated measures are needed to help prevent emergence of further diseases, based on an understanding of environmental drivers.

***TDR thematic reference group on agriculture, environment and infectious diseases: Prof. Xiaongong Zhou, National Institute of Parasitic Diseases , Shanghai, China (by video recording)***

Professor Xiaonong Zhou, Co-Chair of the TDR Thematic Reference Group on Agriculture, Environment and Infectious Diseases, presented an overview of the activities of this group. The core themes include the

interaction between human societies and natural ecosystems in the epidemiology of infectious diseases, including the potential impact of climate change and its repercussions; natural resource development and management; food security and nutrition, and health impact assessment. The group has held two meetings, in Beijing (2008) and Shanghai (2009), linked with stakeholder consultations.

***TDR disease reference group on dengue and emerging viral diseases of public health importance: Prof. Jeremy Farrar, Centre for Tropical Diseases, Ho Chi Minh City, Viet Nam***

The membership and progress made by the TDR expert reference group on dengue and emerging viral diseases were presented by Professor Farrar, as Chair of the group. In setting the context for the group's work, the significance of globalization in the emergence and spread of viral diseases was emphasized, including changing patterns of international travel (particularly between Asia and Africa) that require creative responses.

The crucial importance of responding rapidly and flexibly to emerging viral diseases with pandemic potential was emphasized, due to the probability of rapid early spread. Prompt clinical research is essential to understand these emerging diseases, and consideration should be given to ensuring that ethical frameworks do not inappropriately slow progress. Open access clinical research protocols would facilitate more efficient clinical research. A major concern, with global implications, is the rapid emergence of antimicrobial resistance in South-East Asia.

With respect to dengue, positive developments include a first phase III vaccine trial (in Thailand), and development of a new antigen test for early diagnosis of dengue. The importance of indigenous research efforts to tackle local health problems was stressed, while benefiting from collaboration with trusted international partners. In the context of diminishing research funds from international sources due to financial crises, potential research funding sources from philanthropists in Asia might be explored.

**Conceptual framework of the global report for research on infectious diseases of poverty: Dr C. Davies, consultant, TDR-Stewardship**

The TDR Global Report is intended as a concise strategic information resource and advocacy tool to facilitate stakeholder decisions and agenda setting. It will draw on the analytical framework of the 10 TDR expert reference groups and present a synthesis of the key conclusions, including recommendations on top-level priorities for action.

The report will focus on three major themes of importance in the current international policy debate drawing out implications for infectious diseases of poverty: (i) environment including climate change; (ii) health delivery systems for universal coverage; and (iii) innovation and new technologies. The different chapters will be led by eminent authors with diverse perspectives and expertise in research and public health, working with Chairs of the TDR expert reference groups.

The major anticipated audiences are funders and decision-makers in disease-endemic countries as well as the research community. The report is intended to provide a strategic framework to facilitate more coherent collective action by stakeholders with the overall goal of accelerating research efforts against infectious diseases of poverty for improved health. The first TDR Global Report will be published in 2011 with subsequent updates every 2/3 years, enabling progress to be tracked. There is also an opportunity for the Report to generate specific case studies and priorities in infectious diseases research for inclusion in the 2012 *World Health Report*, which will for the first time focus on health research.

**6. Session 3: Stakeholders' perspectives on research on infectious diseases of poverty and roles of stewardship Chair: Prof. Pratap Singhasivanon**

Short presentations were made by Dr V.K. Bhasin, Dr B. Ravindram, Dr M. Ghasem and Dr W. Satimai as representatives of universities and research institutes in India and Indonesia, and the Ministry of Public Health of Thailand. These presentations gave valuable insights into ongoing research into infectious diseases of poverty, including identified priorities and challenges, as well as perspectives on the role of TDR, past and future.

For example, in Central Java, leprosy, lymphatic filariasis, dengue and leptospirosis had been identified as priorities, although there were difficulties in identifying sources of funding for research on leptospirosis. Indian research institutes receive very little TDR funding currently, but significant national resources are available for biomedical research through several national agencies. The importance of research into non-medical determinants of health in India was identified, to avoid an over-reliance on biomedical solutions. Thailand has identified research priorities and drawn up a roadmap to address these priorities which include behavioural science research, cost-effectiveness studies and more accurate estimation of the disease burden.

## **7. Session 4: Research in infectious diseases of poverty: Sustainability, resource needs with emphasis on the least developed Member States. Chair: Prof. C.P. Ramachandran**

A series of brief presentations provided the perspective of Member States on resource needs and sustainability issues for research on infectious diseases of poverty.

Dr Rakesh Thakur, representing the Ministry of Health of the Government of Nepal, discussed resource mobilization strategies for NTD elimination and control projects in Nepal, including a project targeting schistosomiasis, trachoma and lymphatic filariasis with an integrated approach, which had been launched in June 2010; a dengue control programme; and a kala-azar elimination programme. Good progress has been made against some diseases, including significant decreases in confirmed malaria cases and declaration of leprosy elimination in December 2009.

The priorities and activities of the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) were presented by Dr Rashmi Arora. Significantly, a National Health Research Policy had recently been drafted by the Department of Health Research of the ICMR to guide activities in this area and to set the research agenda for the country.

Constraints identified included the absence of a “research culture” and a climate that fosters health; neglect of translational research; and poor access to research literature. India is one of the top five funders of research into neglected diseases, although a high proportion is focused on malaria. The need for India to play a stronger role in research training within the Region was emphasized.

Dr Robed Amin, of the Dhaka Medical College, presented perspectives on the role of the Ministry of Science and Technology. Bangladesh has identified schistosomiasis, leishmaniasis, filariasis, leprosy, trachoma, yaws and rabies as important NTDs, and research priorities have been identified. A summary of the activities for the control of these diseases was presented. There needs to be greater intersectoral coordination and cooperation for more effective activities, particularly between the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Science and Technology.

Dr Thiravat Hemachudha, of the WHO Collaborating Centre for Research and Training in Viral Zoonoses, Thailand, emphasised the critical importance of intersectoral co-operation and co-ordination for managing emerging infections, particularly zoonoses where a holistic human and animal health approach is needed (“One world health”). The need to integrate multiple scientific disciplines and partners presents complex challenges. Adequate preparedness, accurate prediction and appropriate responses are required to combat emerging infections. Laboratory networks, and field epidemiology training have been strengthened in Thailand to increase preparedness and the capacity for rapid response.

## **8. Summary of discussions and conclusions**

The following are the key points and issues raised during the broad-ranging discussions:

### **New TDR strategy and vision**

- While recognizing the value of previous TDR funding, there was support for TDR’s new strategy and vision, including the new “stewardship” role as a facilitator and catalysing agent. Participants acknowledged the need to respond to the changing

research and epidemiological environment, and the importance of promoting an effective international research effort against infectious diseases of poverty.

- Efforts should be continued to raise awareness of the new TDR strategy and programmes, including the TropIKA.net information resource, as these were still not known in many locations.
- Participants emphasized the importance of continuing technical inputs from WHO into NTD research and control programmes, and in this respect noted the value of the TDR research think tank initiative, including ten expert reference groups providing an analytical framework for analyses of gaps and priorities in NTD research. The scope of these reference groups, within the stewardship programme extends beyond the normal TDR focus diseases.
- A number of Member States noted difficulties in obtaining funding for research on NTDs, particularly those outside special initiatives. There is a need for additional and effective advocacy documents and information resources to help guide funding and action in priority areas in NTD research. The outputs from the TDR expert reference groups, and the *Global Report on Research on Infectious Diseases of Poverty*, could play an important role in facilitating decisions and agenda setting for research.
- The outcomes of the TDR expert reference group activities, and the *Global Report* should be widely publicized and openly available so that Member States can utilize the findings.
- TDR and the WHO regional Advisory Committees on Health Research (ACHRs) should collaborate to review the outcomes of analyses by the expert reference groups, harmonize regional and global research priorities, and identify mechanisms for taking forward priorities.
- The value of previous TDR research training grants in the SEA Region was recognized and appreciated, and there were calls for continuing opportunities. It was noted that TDR had developed a new approach to capacity-building responding to changing circumstances and needs. The new empowerment function goes beyond individual training awards to include institutional

strengthening and leadership training, and activities are now primarily focused on the least developed countries.

### **NTD research in the WHO South-East Asia Region**

- The WHO SEA Region is at particular risk for new and emerging infectious diseases including zoonoses, linked to environmental and climatic changes and high populations, with serious implications for global health.
- Emerging drug resistance is a crucial problem to be addressed in the Region to avoid losing the benefits of recent progress against infectious diseases.
- Expertise in vector biology was identified as an important need in the Region for effective control of insect-transmitted diseases.
- Maternal and child health, and particularly respiratory and diarrhoeal diseases remain of major importance in the Region requiring continuing attention, with implications for achieving the MDGs.
- The WHO South-East Asia and the Western Pacific Regions face many common challenges in NTDs, and opportunities for further co-operation and collaboration between the regions should be explored for greater impact against these diseases.
- WHO-SEARO recently organized the following activities:
  - Regional workshop on Research Priorities in Communicable Diseases, 4-6 March 2009, resulting in recommendations to strengthen regional research.<sup>3</sup>
  - Informal consultation on Research to Assess Communicable Disease Impact of Climate Change,<sup>4</sup> 24-26 August 2009, leading to the development of generic protocols to study the impact of climate change on vector borne and diarrheal diseases.

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<sup>3</sup> [http://www.searo.who.int/en/Section10/Section2417\\_14808.htm](http://www.searo.who.int/en/Section10/Section2417_14808.htm)

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.searo.who.int/en/Section10/Section2417\\_15180.htm](http://www.searo.who.int/en/Section10/Section2417_15180.htm)

- Two research proposals on climate change impact in Nepal and India, funded by WHO-SEARO and the Kobe Centre. Four more projects are to be funded.
- Neglected Tropical Diseases Partners' Meeting for the South-East Asia Region, 21-22 June 2010, resulting in the Bangkok Declaration.<sup>5</sup>
- The South-East Asia Regional Conference on Epidemiology, 8-10 March 2010, New Delhi, resulting in recommendations to strengthen epidemiology in the Region<sup>6</sup> (not limited to infectious diseases).

### **NTD research in Member States**

- The crucial importance of research for health and development was emphasized, underscoring the value of all nations developing active, relevant research programmes, and not just the higher income countries. There was strong support for disease-endemic countries playing a more substantive role in leading and supporting NTD research, including innovation research and not limited to operational and implementation research.
- In many countries, more effective mechanisms are needed to help synchronise research with health priorities and control programme needs. This may require more effective national health research systems, including integrated approaches across relevant sectors, extending beyond health to include science and technology, agriculture and finance for example. Research to identify optimal integrated approaches for NTD elimination/eradication should be promoted.
- Intersectoral cooperation is critical for responding effectively to the challenges of zoonoses, requiring consideration of human and animal health issues in an integrated approach.

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<sup>5</sup> [http://www.searo.who.int/LinkFiles/CDS\\_Bangkok\\_Declaration\\_21-22june10.pdf](http://www.searo.who.int/LinkFiles/CDS_Bangkok_Declaration_21-22june10.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.searo.who.int/EN/Section10/Section2612.htm>

## **Capacity-building for NTD research**

- Much progress had been made in building research expertise in the South-East Asia Region in the past decades, but continuing efforts are needed to build a critical mass of research expertise, particularly in low-income countries.
- Opportunities to develop productive training and research links between TDR-trained research leaders in the South-East Asia Region were noted.
- The research strengths of emerging economies such as India, China and Thailand present excellent opportunities for developing partnerships between developing countries to support training and capacity-building more broadly within the Region. There were specific offers to support training workshops and programmes through collaborative partnerships (e.g. from India).

## **9. Recommendations**

Stakeholders, while acknowledging the pivotal role played by TDR under its stewardship programme for promoting research for the control, elimination/eradication of NTDs, urged increased advocacy for accelerating the success of these efforts and made the following recommendations:

### **Member States to:**

- Increase intersectoral (multisectoral) approaches and coordination to effectively combat infectious diseases, including the growing impact of environmental changes.
- Strengthen and establish networks of alumni of TDR training programmes and similar beneficiaries to build and enhance partnerships for the elimination and eradication of NTDs.
- Actively promote and establish regional partnerships and networks for research training, particularly building on countries with stronger research bases.

**TDR to:**

- Enhance awareness on its new strategy and vision, including the new stewardship programme and the TropIKA.net information platform.
- Widely disseminate the outcomes of the analyses by the expert disease-specific and thematic reference groups (DRG/TRGs) and increase the participation of the member countries of the Region in these groups.
- Utilize the forthcoming Global Report for Research on Infectious Diseases of Poverty to inform decision-makers and funders on priorities, capacity needs, gaps in funding and funding opportunities, besides outlining the achievements and highlighting success stories.
- Facilitate and promote intersectoral approaches to research and control of infectious diseases of poverty.

**WHO/SEARO to:**

- Develop a regional integrated strategic plan for research for the elimination/eradication of NTDs in the Region harmonizing with other global/regional and TDR strategic plans.
- Mobilize additional resources to enhance support to research in the context of control, elimination and eradication of NTDs in the South-East Asia Region.
- Enhance cooperation and collaboration with the WHO Regional Office for the Western Pacific in areas where there are opportunities for concerted action to respond to common challenges in NTD research.

## **Annex 1**

### **Agenda**

- Registration
- Opening session
- Objectives of the Meeting:
  - TDR's New Vision and Strategy
  - Research Plan and Strategy of SEARO
- Overview of TDR expert reference groups:
  - Expected output and implementation
  - Environment and infectious diseases
  - Climate change and Infectious diseases
  - Stakeholders' perspectives on research on infectious diseases of poverty and stewardship
  - Research in infectious diseases
- Conclusion

## Annex 2

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The WHO South-East Asia Region bears the second highest burden of neglected tropical diseases (NTDs). Some of the NTDs in the Region include lymphatic filariasis (LF), leprosy, visceral leishmaniasis, yaws and soil-transmitted helminthiasis (STH). This meeting report describes the deliberations of the Tropical Diseases Research (TDR)/WHO South-East Asia Regional Consultation on NTDs.

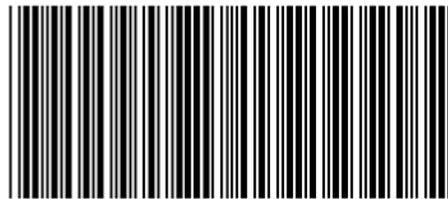
The TDRs recently developed a new vision and strategy, responding to fresh challenges linked with the changing global research environment, all of which were thoroughly discussed. Several partners also participated in the meeting and contributed to the discussions. Enhancement of collaboration between TDR and the WHO Regional Office for South-East Asia was observed to be very useful in eliminating some of the NTDs, namely, Lymphatic filariasis, yaws, etc.



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