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Building Resilient Health Systems through further Investments in TB

By Adrian Thomas, Private Sector Constituency Board Member for the Stop TB Partnership.

The numbers are in, and unfortunately, they are grim. Early data from 2020, collected by the Stop TB Partnership and the U.S. Agency for International Development, indicates that the COVID-19 pandemic is seriously impacting global efforts to address tuberculosis (TB) as health systems are disrupted and resources diverted. Numerous countries with a high burden of TB saw substantial declines – ranging from 16 to 41 percent – in the number people receiving treatment. To put this in perspective, a 20 percent drop reverses more than a decade of progress, returning us to where we were in 2008. 40 percent is a potential knockout blow to efforts to end TB.

The decline in diagnoses confirms some of the worst fears of the TB community and signals a global health crisis that must be addressed without delay. As the Chair of the Stop TB Partnership's Private Sector Constituency, I echo the recent calls from Dr. Lucica Ditiu, the Stop TB Partnership's Executive Director, and Dr. Harsh Vardhan, India's Minister of Health & Family Welfare, to jumpstart programs aimed at finding people living with TB even as we continue to tackle the COVID-19 crisis.

An important first step is immediate national action. Ministers of health representing the countries with the biggest declines in TB diagnoses should develop and execute operational recovery plans as quickly as possible. India provides a possible model for others to follow. The country's rapid response plan, developed by the Indian Minister of Health & Family Welfare in August 2020, centers on harmonizing the COVID-19 response with TB case-finding efforts. This has real implications on the frontlines of care and shows how the infrastructure being developed in response to COVID-19 can also be leveraged against TB.

As the India rapid response plan demonstrates, TB and COVID-19 share a striking number of commonalities across both disease presentation, as well as diagnosis and management requirements. In practice, across geographies, the health system infrastructure developed for the management of TB was quickly re-purposed and deployed to help tackle the COVID-19 pandemic. The TB community immediately contributed skilled health workers and diagnostic technologies to the fight against COVID-19, helping to accelerate health system capacity to manage this new threat.

To mark this year's World TB Day, the Stop TB Partnership's Private Sector Constituency is today launching a new white paper outlining the ways in which TB infrastructure has been leveraged in the fight against COVID-19, and how new innovations borne out of the COVID-19 crisis ought to be applied to accelerate the end of TB.

The paper asserts that, as the global community moves beyond the initial, emergency phase of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is time to take stock of the new innovations in diagnosis and care borne out of this period and ensure that they are adequately applied towards the fight against TB and other infectious diseases. Because of the similarities between COVID-19 and TB, very many of these new tools will be applicable to TB identification and care. Just as the TB community put forward resources and tools to manage COVID-19, the global community now has a duty to close the loop, creating a

"virtuous circle" wherein new COVID-19 innovations are directed back towards the fight against TB. If implemented, this virtuous circle could serve as a model for applying new technologies and care models from one condition to other conditions.

The paper also explores the future potential of increased investments in TB, highlighting that further commitments to TB infrastructure could yield other benefits. These benefits could include: improved pandemic response and crisis response capabilities, enhanced care outcomes via better access to innovative medicines, preventative care, and support services, improved care affordability, reduced healthcare turnover and decreased overall costs through greater efficiencies.

While we face a challenging path forward to end TB we can make inroads right now, even as we continue to address COVID-19, through a comprehensive approach to public health and the deployment of innovative new technologies. It is critical that we do so: countless lives hang in the balance, but acting swiftly, we can find the missing millions of people living with TB and help get the world back on track toward the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal of ending the TB epidemic by 2030.