

Community Working Group on Health



Press Statement

13 November 2024

Government must honour its commitment to eliminate cholera as a public health problem by 2028

The Community Working Group on Health (CWGH) commends government for taking bold and tangible measures to address major public health challenges through its supreme law, the Constitution, the Public Health Act and indeed other legal and policy frameworks. There has also been corresponding structural arrangements in the government wide mechanism to include the presidential declaration as we saw during Covid-19, previous cholera and measles epidemics, the inter-ministerial and multisectoral formations, the national cholera taskforce, the interagency coordination committee in line with ensuring adequate attention to all the determinants of the major public health challenges. In terms of cholera, the country took a severe beating during the 2008/9 epidemic, but quickly learnt key lessons to effectively detect and control the subsequent ones, which became fewer, less frequent and less intense. Targeted vaccination also ensured that hotspots were doused and some population immunity prevented further infections and severe disease. We applauded the crafting of the 2018-28 National Cholera Elimination Road-map; the 10 Year Promise, which had brought together all sectors and entities influencing cholera and its determinants to jointly address the menace once and for all.

We are therefore concerned at the lack of attention to effective implementation of this impressive paperwork. It has translated into avoidable illnesses and deaths. To this end, the CWGH urges the government to urgently ensure adherence to its Constitutional, legal and policy provisions on cholera and related diseases. We want to see long-lasting and sustainable mechanisms to stop the current and future outbreaks of cholera in order that we regain back our dignity and health. Cholera has already claimed an innocent life in Kariba district of Mashonaland West province. The country cannot afford a repeat of the 2008/9 cholera disaster that saw over 4 000 people succumbing to the contagious disease, in a situation that could have been prevented or avoided.

The onset of the rainy season, persistence of water and power challenges, poor sanitation and the piling and uncollected cabbage in most towns and cities makes it more urgent than ever for the government to take definitive measures before the country plunges yet again into an uncontrollable outbreak. This at a time when the health care services have been struggling.

While CWGH acknowledge the current government efforts to contain the spread of the disease by sharing vital preventative information among communities and distributing Personal Protective Equipment (PPEs), we strongly feel that such actions are piece-meal and divergent from the comprehensive cholera

elimination plan which sought to address the root causes of the epidemic. We have many questions to ask, especially why creating more health problems in a system that can hardly treat even simple illnesses anymore? What about the saying “prevention is better than cure” when most cities and towns hardly adhere to the laws and standards for adequate safe water, waste management food standards, and housing. We have whole housing developments inhabited without water, sewerage and waste management, water quantity and quality never checked nor documented, and beverages and foods now just prepared and sold by unapproved persons in unlicensed premises. All these contraventions of the public health act, bye laws and other statutes place the public at great health risk and exposure to cholera and related diseases.

We call upon the government to reconsider and reprioritize population health and start effective implementation of the proven effective strategies that address the root causes of cholera outbreak. It is practically illogical to treat cholera patients and return them to the same deplorable conditions that caused them to fall ill in the first place.

There is need to address the social determinants of health as elucidated in the Constitution and said legal frameworks and 10-Year Elimination Plan. CWGH calls for rekindling of the multi-sectoral coordination to eliminate cholera by increasing access to clean and sustainable water supply at household level including access to basic sanitation facilities and providing hygienic living conditions. It should be pointed out that access to clean water, sanitation and hygiene efforts are much more effective when people are aware of the risks as well as what they can do to prevent illness. Hygiene promotion efforts should therefore be coordinated and multi-sectoral with the communities taking centre-stage. Currently the communities continue to bear the brunt of having to scrounge for water, manage their human waste, household waste and still care for the increasing numbers of sick relatives and pay huge out-of-pocket to systems that provide poor service. It's a crime against humanity.

The cholera outbreak of 2008-2009 was a marker of the need for investment in water and sanitation infrastructure. It is very sad that we continue to lose lives to a primitive and medieval disease like cholera that is avoidable, preventable and treatable!

The Community Working Group on Health (CWGH) is a network of national membership based civil society and community-based organizations who aim to collectively enhance community participation in health in Zimbabwe.

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