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Opinion Article

# Innovative Approaches to Combatting Neglected Tropical Diseases Worldwide

**Batista Pereira***

*Department of Public Health, Southeast University, Nanjing, China*

## DESCRIPTION

Neglected Tropical Diseases (NTDs) are a diverse group of infectious diseases that primarily affect the poorest populations in tropical and subtropical regions. Despite causing significant morbidity and mortality, NTDs have historically received less attention than other global health issues like malaria, tuberculosis, or HIV/AIDS. They include diseases such as dengue, leishmaniasis, schistosomiasis, Chagas disease, onchocerciasis (river blindness), lymphatic filariasis and trachoma, among others. Affecting over one billion people worldwide, NTDs contribute to a vicious cycle of poverty and disease, hindering social and economic development in many low- and middle-income countries. However, in recent years, innovative approaches to combatting these diseases have emerged, offering hope for better control and eventual eradication.

A significant challenge in the fight against NTDs is the lack of effective and affordable treatments. Drug development for NTDs has traditionally been underfunded due to the low commercial potential of treatments targeting poor populations. However, recent innovations have shifted this dynamic. Drug repositioning, or repurposing existing drugs for new therapeutic uses, has become a promising strategy for NTDs. By identifying previously-approved drugs that can be effective against these diseases, researchers can bypass the lengthy and costly process of developing new drugs from scratch. For example, miltefosine, initially developed as a cancer treatment, has been repurposed to treat leishmaniasis, providing an effective oral treatment for this debilitating disease.

Another innovative approach is the development of fixed-dose combination therapies, where multiple drugs are combined into a single pill. This strategy simplifies treatment regimens, improves patient compliance and reduces the risk of drug resistance. For instance, combination therapies have been used in Mass Drug Administration (MDA) programs for lymphatic filariasis and onchocerciasis, helping to interrupt transmission and reduce disease burden. Nanotechnology is being explored as a novel method for improving drug delivery for NTDs. By encapsulating drugs in nanoparticles, researchers can enhance drug stability, bioavailability and targeted delivery, reducing side effects and improving efficacy. This technology has the potential to revolutionize treatments for diseases like leishmaniasis and Chagas disease, where traditional drugs often have limited effectiveness or severe side effects.

Vaccination is one of the most effective public health interventions for infectious diseases, yet for many NTDs, vaccines either do not exist or are still in development. Recent advances in biotechnology and immunology have sparked renewed interest in NTD vaccine development. Dengue fever, caused by the dengue virus transmitted by mosquitoes, has seen a significant rise in cases worldwide. After decades of research, the first dengue vaccine, Dengvaxia, was approved. However, it has limitations, especially for those not previously exposed to the virus. New vaccines, such as TAK-003, which is in advanced clinical trials, are showing promise in providing broader protection against all four dengue virus serotypes, potentially offering a more effective solution for controlling dengue outbreaks. Schistosomiasis, a parasitic disease caused by freshwater snails, affects over 200 million people worldwide. Research into vaccines against schistosomiasis has gained momentum, with several candidates in preclinical and clinical development. One promising approach is the Sm-TSP-2 vaccine, which targets a protein found on the surface of the schistosome parasite. Early trials have shown potential for reducing parasite burden and transmission, offering hope for a long-term solution to this widespread disease.

Vector-borne diseases, such as malaria, dengue and Chagas disease, are transmitted by insects like mosquitoes, flies and bugs. Traditional vector control strategies, such as insecticide-treated bed nets and indoor residual spraying, have been effective but face challenges like insecticide resistance. Innovations in vector control are helping to address these issues. One of the most exciting developments in vector control is the use of genetically modified mosquitoes to reduce disease transmission. Researchers have developed mosquitoes that are either sterile or carry genes that prevent them from transmitting diseases like dengue and malaria. These genetically modified

**Correspondence to:** Batista Pereira, Department of Public Health, Southeast University, Nanjing, China, E-mail: previously_b@email.com

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mosquitoes are released into the environment, where they mate with wild populations, reducing the number of disease-carrying mosquitoes over time. Field trials in Brazil and other countries have shown promising results in reducing mosquito populations and dengue transmission.

Another innovative approach involves the use of *Wolbachia* bacteria, which naturally infects many insect species but is not harmful to humans. When mosquitoes are infected with Wolbachia, they are less able to transmit diseases like dengue, Zika and chikungunya. Field trials have demonstrated that releasing *Wolbachia*-infected mosquitoes can significantly reduce the incidence of these diseases in affected areas. Digital technology is playing an increasingly important role in NTD control, from improving disease surveillance to enhancing treatment delivery. Mobile health (mHealth) applications are being used to support NTD control efforts by improving communication between healthcare workers, patients and public health authorities. For example, mobile apps are being used to track MDA campaigns, monitor drug distribution and report adverse drug reactions in real-time. These tools help to ensure that interventions reach the people who need them most and improve the efficiency of NTD programs.

Geospatial mapping and predictive analytics are being used to identify NTD hotspots and predict disease outbreaks. By integrating data on environmental conditions, population movement and disease prevalence, public health authorities can better target interventions and allocate resources. This approach has been particularly effective for diseases like schistosomiasis and lymphatic filariasis, where transmission is closely linked to specific environmental factors.

Innovative approaches to combatting neglected tropical diseases have made significant strides in recent years, offering new hope for controlling and eventually eliminating these debilitating diseases. From drug repositioning and vaccine development to digital health solutions and vector control innovations, a multifaceted approach is critical to addressing the complex challenges posed by NTDs. Continued investment in research, public-private partnerships and global health initiatives will be essential to sustaining progress and ensuring that the world's most vulnerable populations are not left behind in the fight against neglected tropical diseases.