

Global Programme Managers Meeting on Leprosy Control Strategy, Delhi, April 2009
Short input (6-8 min) for the introductory session (manuscript for free speech)

(...) First of all, let me pick up the kind words of Dr. Pannikar. In recent letters and emails he called the Novartis drug donation the single most important intervention in the fight against leprosy and urged us to mention again the commitment to continue the MDT drug donation during that part of the fight which still has to be won.

Yes, it might be the single most important piece in the fight against leprosy, as the multi drug therapy makes the disease basically a manageable disease. However, if something is manageable it doesn't necessarily mean that it gets managed.

Imagine a world where the drug donation would be more or less the only notable contribution – it would be without any value, as it wouldn't reach the patients (or as nobody would know where the patients are).

With other words, if a lot of other equally important pieces in the fight against leprosy weren't there, the drug donation would not have any impact at all. The key word here is: collective action – collective action and partnership.

The efforts of various players must fit together to make each of the contributions valuable. Therefore we are proud and happy that Novartis can act as one of the strategic partners for further reducing the burden of leprosy.

I am sure that nobody in Novartis can think of a reason to become the spoilsport in an endeavor where all other partners and players do a good job.

To repeat this commitment, the statement of the Novartis CEO, Dr. Daniel Vasella, is still valid and not under consideration: "We will continue our efforts to reach out and help those who are afflicted with this disease until leprosy is finally eradicated!"

And I can add that there has been an conversation between Daniel Vasella and Klaus Leisinger recently which made clear that also the current crisis is definitely no reason to reduce our engagement in the field of leprosy – rather the opposite.

[If you think one of the 90'000 people of Novartis says something different, please let us know so that we can sort out any misunderstanding.]

For me, the continuation of the drug donation is so natural and unmistakable that a different point seems much more important – [not only because of my professional background. You might know that my main area of work is to advance concepts and approaches of corporate responsibility, focusing on how to organize companies and other societal institutions to better meet the challenges of our global society – if not: to better serve the public good.]

The point I consider to be much more important is the Foundation's new commitment to globally promote and facilitate surveys on how to improve the quality and efficiency of leprosy control activities.

The Foundation's usual mode of action is to work in a small team identifying capable project partners or build up new project partners to achieve the operational goals in the areas we see as priority. We are always asking: What makes a difference, what would not happen without our input?

Compared to other epidemic diseases like HIV-Aids, like Malaria or like Tuberculosis it is obvious that a rare disease like leprosy is not receiving a lot of attention and funding.

And it is definitely not only medical research which is suffering lack of support. The more we look into this, the more we get the impression that particularly non-medical, operational research is scarce and that we should invest in promoting and facilitating survey activities to better understand the effects of the different leprosy control practices and to find out how the limited resources for improving the quality of leprosy control systems could be used most efficiently.

First of all, we think it is important to better connect the few existing efforts to mutually add value and we are happy to facilitate this.

Secondly, we are also willing to support and promote new survey projects if these promise to create crucial knowledge on how to identify leprosy cases reliably and, first and foremost, in a very early stage.

So, in the Foundation's typical mode of action we will try to connect the existing pieces of a jigsaw AND enable project partners to provide some missing pieces to that jigsaw, because we want to see the fight against leprosy progressing in big or at least notable steps, not small steps.

So please don't hesitate to use the opportunity of this conference and let me know if you have ideas on that – I would be happy to travel home with a grown wish-list.

Thank you very much for giving me the opportunity in the opening session to mention these two points, the assurance of the ongoing commitment to provide MDT free of charge and the invitation of suggestions for our new survey initiative.

Now, I am looking forward to this meeting of the world's most experienced program managers, a very welcome opportunity for me to learn about additional facets of how to win the fight against leprosy (...)

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