

As the world comes together to tackle the COVID-19 pandemic, it is critical that essential services and operations continue to protect the lives of people with Tuberculosis (TB). Given the potential diversion of resources, shortages of staff, disruption of services, among other factors, new or adapted strategies are required to mitigate the potential impact of COVID-19 on TB control efforts and ensure continuity of TB services and activities.

The Special Programme for Research and Training in Tropical Diseases (TDR), in partnership with the Access and Delivery Partnership Project (ADP¹), Damien Foundation and The Union, is proudly supporting national TB programmes (NTPs) throughout West and Central Africa to conduct implementation research (IR) on strategies to mitigating the impact of COVID-19 on TB control efforts.

In early May 2020, a call for letters of interest was distributed throughout the <u>West and Central African Regional Network for TB control (WARN-TB/CARN-TB)</u>, resulting in 20 submissions from NTPs and their research partners in the region. After a competitive evaluation, 11 submissions were selected.

Selected proposals will implement a variety of new and innovative approaches to ensure continuity of TB services during the time of COVID-19 (see Fig.1). Digital technologies will be applied to help overcome issues of access in light of quarantine-related restrictions on movements, such as conducting virtual teleconsultations with patients, using social media to conduct routine supervisory visits among TB facilities and using digital adherence technologies to promote treatment adherence. Studies will also explore ways to further decentralize TB services into the community, thereby reducing requirements for travel, as well as trialling new screening algorithms to enhance detection of TB among those with respiratory systems and suspected of COVID-19.









¹ The Access and Delivery Partnership project (ADP) is a project led and coordinated by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and funded by the government of Japan. ADP brings together UNDP, WHO, TDR and PATH in a unique partnership that helps strengthen capacity in LMICs to ensure health technologies reach the people who need them.

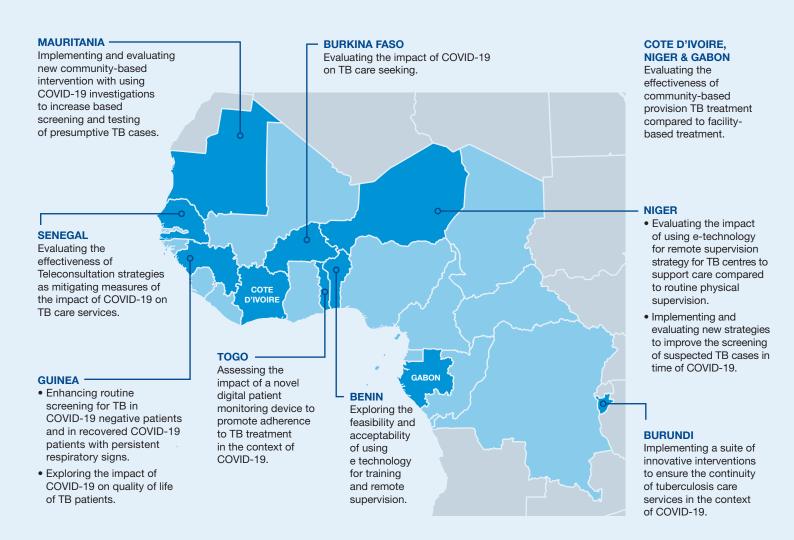


Fig 1: Planned IR studies of successful grantees



We've seen from past experiences with Ebola the significant impact that an infectious disease outbreak can have on routine health care services, including TB. To mitigate the overall impact of COVID-19, we must ensure that routine health services continue to operate and that those that need them have continued access. The eleven studies selected for funding represent the kind of innovative thinking required to find solutions and overcome barriers and challenges posed by COVID-19. This research will help to maintain crucial TB services in West and Central Africa and will also contribute to future preparedness efforts. I'm really encouraged by the caliber of the proposals we received and am proud to be supporting this work along with our partners."

Ongoing technical support and mentorship will be provided to grantees during the research period by TDR, ADP, the Union and Damien Foundation. Alongside this support, TDR and partners will be working with WARN-TB/CARN-TB to help evaluate the impact of COVID-19 on NTP performance in the region. The findings of this evaluation, combined with the lessons that emerge from the IR projects, will be used to inform the development of national and regional contingencies plans that can be enacted by NTPs

in similar, future scenarios.

Dr John Reeder, Director, TDR