Neglected Tropical Diseases in South Asian Region

What is the issue?

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- South Asian region has recorded a notable progress in eliminating and containing various diseases.
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- However, the status of neglected tropical diseases (NTDs) in the South Asian region calls for a last-mile push.
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What are the health achievements in South Asia?

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- Maternal and neonatal tetanus has been eliminated.
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- HIV, TB and malaria epidemics have been halted and reversed after decades of struggle.
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- These will hopefully be ended altogether in the coming years.
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- **Regional** - India is now yaws-free.
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- Maldives, Sri Lanka and Thailand have eliminated *lymphatic filariasis* as a public health problem.
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- Nepal is in the process of validating the elimination of *trachoma* as a public health problem.
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- Nepal also maintained the elimination target for *kala-azar* for more than 3 consecutive years.
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- By the end of 2017, 100% of sub-districts in Bangladesh and 90% of blocks in India had done the same.
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- As a whole, the region remains responsible for the world’s largest *preventive*

chemotherapy campaign.
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What are the shortfalls?

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- NTDs include diseases like leprosy, trachoma, lymphatic filariasis and kala-azar.
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- As the name suggests, NTDs take their most severe toll on the poor and marginalised communities.
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- The political influence of these sections is limited and their health needs are often overlooked.
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- Evidently, South Asian region has eliminated leprosy as a public health problem.
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- But the disease continues to circulate among vulnerable communities.
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- They accounts for more than 60% of leprosy-caused grade two disabilities worldwide.
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- Similarly, several member countries have eliminated *lymphatic filariasis*.
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- However, its burden continues to haunt communities in remote and hard-to-reach areas elsewhere.
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- Region-wide, 53% of all people require mass drug administration to stay free of this disfiguring disease.
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What is the way forward?

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- No member country of the South Asian region can be complacent as one of the 20 NTDs is endemic to each of them.
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- Stable **domestic funding** for national programmes is central to taking forward the progress achieved so far.

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- Member countries must ensure programming is both dynamic and flexible i.e. pursuing large-scale campaigns as well as working creatively across sectors.
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- Going for **mass drug administration** where appropriate and strengthening NTD-related services at the primary level are essential.
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- Simultaneously, **specific efforts** such as roping in agro-engineers in the battle against *schistosomiasis* can be taken up.
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- Similarly, **vector control** must be actively pursued and harnessed by programmes at the local level.
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- These can have immediate and substantial impact on disease transmission in NTD-affected areas.
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- Importantly, member countries should take full advantage of innovations in **research and technology**.
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- The effective use of rapid **diagnostics** can facilitate swift and accurate diagnosis of a range of NTDs.
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- IT infrastructure should be integrated with existing surveillance systems to allow programme managers to gather, analyse and act on real-time data.
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- Ensuring all communities have **access** to health services and the benefits they provide is essential to make them free of NTDs.
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Source: Business Line

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Quick Fact

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Preventive Chemotherapy Campaign

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- This is a public health strategy recommended by WHO against a set of Neglected Tropical Diseases.
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- Preventive Chemotherapy consists of the regular, large-scale administration of drugs, either alone or in combination.
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- It is administered to entire population groups, with the aim of reducing transmission and associated morbidity.
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Lymphatic filariasis

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- Lymphatic filariasis is commonly known as elephantiasis.
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- It is caused by infection with parasites classified as nematodes (roundworms), which are transmitted to humans through mosquitoes.
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- Mosquitoes are infected with microfilariae by ingesting blood when biting an infected host.
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- Infection is usually acquired in childhood causing hidden damage to the lymphatic system.
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- Its visible manifestations may occur later in life, causing temporary or permanent disability.
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Schistosomiasis

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- Schistosomiasis is an acute and chronic disease caused by parasitic worms.
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- People are infected during routine agricultural, domestic, occupational, and recreational activities, which expose them to infested water.
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- Water contamination due to excreta containing parasite eggs, which hatch in water, is also a mode of transmission.
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Trachoma

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- Trachoma is a disease of the eye caused by infection with the bacterium Chlamydia trachomatis.
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- It causes blindness or visual impairment. It is the cause for about 1.4% of all blindness worldwide.
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- Blindness from trachoma is irreversible.
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- Environmental risk factors influencing the transmission of the disease include:
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i. poor hygiene
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ii. crowded households
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iii. water shortage
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iv. inadequate latrines and sanitation facilities
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Kala-azar

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- Visceral leishmaniasis (VL), also known as kala-azar, is caused by the protozoan Leishmania parasites.
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- It is transmitted to humans through infected sandflies.
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- The parasite migrates to the internal organs such as the liver, spleen, and bone marrow; if left untreated, it may result in death.
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- It is characterized by irregular bouts of fever, weight loss, enlargement of the spleen and liver, and anaemia.
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- It is endemic to the Indian subcontinent in 119 districts in four countries (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal).
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