

WELCOME ADDRESS



Many people are struggling to access medicines to save their lives or improve their health. For some, the cost is too high. For others, the Medicines are not available in their local health centre.

A reliable supply of essential medicines is a key element of an effective health system. Reliance on the market alone to supply medicines for the poor people will not work. There is the need to increase poor people's access to affordable essential medicines by improving transparency and accountability within the marketplace. This is what MeTA is all about.

Charles Allotey

Executive Director -Health Access Network

In 2002, there were nearly six million deaths from HIV and AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria. An estimated two million children in developing countries died from prenatal conditions and four million died from just three diseases – pneumonia, measles and diarrhoea. Heart disease, stroke, cancer and other chronic diseases are rising in low income countries. Yet medicines exist for nearly all of these health problems.

By 2015, an estimated 10.5 million lives could be saved every year by expanding access to existing interventions for infectious diseases, maternal and child, and non-communicable diseases. This indicates why access to essential medicines is so important. Access to essential medicines has made a difference in so many ways. The number of child deaths from measles has fallen 60 per cent since 1990. Access to drug treatment has transformed AIDS into a potentially manageable chronic illness.

Essential medicines really save lives, reduce suffering and improve health, but only if they are of good quality and safe, available, affordable and properly used. In Ghana there are no sufficient data to suggest that these conditions are being met. Essential medicines are different from other consumer products and require special attention, in that: the consumer often does not choose the medicine; it is prescribed by a clinician or recommended by a pharmacist. Even when the consumer chooses the medicine, he or she is not trained to judge its appropriateness, safety, quality or value for money. The consumer often cannot judge the likely consequences of not obtaining a needed medicine.

Policies and actions have to be proposed to address these challenges with the purpose of making essential medicines more accessible.

Prescribing a new expensive treatment, despite the availability of proven cheaper alternatives, is not cost effective and wastes the scarce resources of governments and patients.

There is clearly a conflict of interests when doctors both prescribe and dispense – it is the patient who pays the price when profit comes before ethics.

Improvements in efficiency of procurement, and local manufacturing of medicines to obtain **the lowest possible prices for products of assured quality**, should be made an urgent priority.

Transparency in price information is lacking. It is vital that patients are informed of current prices, for instance through regular publication in newspapers, so they know what is an acceptable price for a medicine when entering a pharmacy. Ghana, being a MeTA country, has committed to working with civil

society in promoting access to affordable medicines. There is a lot to be done by civil society to represent the needs of the poor and in promoting social justice: These include:

1. To monitor health outcomes in Ghana,
2. To ensure the public understand information on medicines quality, availability and pricing, to help inform public debate.
3. To disseminate information and encourage community engagement on health outcomes through the media, community meetings and any means possible.

It is against this background that Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) interested in access to medicines, governance, transparency and accountability processes are attending this national capacity building workshop.

The workshop is part of civil society capacity strengthening work of the international Medicines Transparency Alliance (MeTA). It aims to use a multi-stakeholder approach towards increasing transparency around the regulation, selection, procurement, sale, distribution and use of medicines in developing countries, thereby strengthening governance, encouraging responsible business practices and ultimately improving access to medicines, especially for the poor.

The meaningful participation of Civil Society in these multi-stakeholder activities in Ghana is critical to the success of the process.

This five-day workshop will help participants:

- Feel more prepared and comfortable to engage with national policy processes;
- Acquire specific knowledge on issues related to access to medicines, in particular transparency, accountability and efficiency issues;
- Acquire skills to promote greater transparency and accountability at national, district and community levels;
- Strengthen networking and establish linkages among CSOs working on essential medicines issues, and
- Develop ideas on campaigns and advocacy on medicines issues in Ghana.

The workshop will be participatory in nature and make use of the knowledge, skills and experiences of participants as a major resource throughout. It will include knowledge sharing, skills development, experience sharing and zonal planning sessions each day.

A one day-field visit will provide participants with an opportunity for direct learning about the issues of transparency in the Ghana pharmaceutical sector.

It is worth noting that the first workshop of this kind was organised for selected civil society organisations based in Ghana, Uganda, and Zambia in February 2008. It is our hope that at the end of this workshop potential areas for advocacy initiatives on access to medicines will be identified so we can all work together.

On behalf of the board of Health Access Network, the planning committee of the Ghana MeTA Civil Society Group and on my own behalf, I wish to welcome all present here to this important workshop.