
MENINGITIS ENVIRONMENTAL RISK INFORMATION TECHNOLOGIES 'MERIT' PROJECT

STEERING COMMITTEE

TERMS OF REFERENCE

BACKGROUND

Meningococcal meningitis is one of the most feared epidemic diseases in Africa because of its rapid onset, high fatality rates and long-term disabilities, such as brain-damage and deafness, affecting many survivors. While epidemic outbreaks occur sporadically in districts across Africa's 'Meningitis Belt' during the dry season, some seasons are particularly devastating such as the one in 1996-1997 which affected 250,000 people and led to 25,000 fatalities.

Current control strategies based on reactive vaccination have not been fully satisfactory in reducing the burden of the disease within the 'Meningitis Belt' – an area in Sub-Saharan Africa stretching from Senegal in the west to Ethiopia in the east.

New efforts are underway to provide long-term protection to at-risk populations of around 350 million, establishing the means to avoid devastating regional epidemics involving hundreds of thousands of cases and tens of thousands of deaths. This will be possible in large part due to the development of an effective long-lasting conjugate vaccine which targets the dominant strain (Group A) of the bacteria which causes meningococcal meningitis and is associated with epidemics.

At a GEO hosted meningitis consultative meeting in September 2007, participants agreed on the need for greater cooperation between communities and approved the formation of the Meningitis Environmental Risk Information Technologies (MERIT) project to encourage greater cross-disciplinary interactions and connect research more directly to the needs of public health practitioners.

A MERIT Steering Committee was formalized in June 2008 to provide overall direction and guidance for the ongoing development and implementation of activities within the MERIT framework. This document outlines the Terms of Reference for the committee.

GENERAL CONDITIONS

The MERIT project is a collaborative effort of the World Health Organization (WHO) and members of the environmental, public health and epidemiological communities. The project is extending current capabilities to more effectively combine environmental information with knowledge of epidemic meningococcal meningitis. It is expected that this will have an immediate impact on public health outcomes in Africa through increasing the effectiveness of meningitis prevention and response control strategies.

While each of the individual institutions involved in MERIT pursues its own mandate with respect to its own organizational responsibilities, each recognizes the value of cooperation to achieve the ultimate goal of eradication of epidemic meningococcal meningitis disease.

GENERAL OBJECTIVES

The Steering Committee shall ensure the overall success of the MERIT project. It will work to establish MERIT as an effective program of cross-disciplinary interactions that will advance knowledge of the relative role of environmental, socio-economic and epidemiological factors in epidemic meningococcal meningitis. It will ensure that this knowledge is utilized to improve public health outcomes and to achieve the ultimate goal of the eradication of the disease, regardless of the research outcomes. The committee will guide the execution of MERIT during the course of the project.

The committee shall:

- a) Review and approve the MERIT Framework document, which will guide the activities of the project;
- b) Define the MERIT project deliverables based on the expectations of the operational health community, the research opportunities and the availability of resources;
- c) Define milestones and goals for MERIT project activities;
- d) Identify opportunities to increase community participation in MERIT;
- e) Identify opportunities for collaboration between MERIT and other programmes;
- f) Define decision points and the necessary steps to carry out MERIT project activities;
- g) Assess the value and facilitate the transition of evidence based research results to operations within the appropriate organizations;
- h) Identify institutional needs and support capacity building efforts in both directions along the 'value chain' from the research to the operational communities;
- i) Provide oversight for sub-projects and activities funded by donations received in trust for MERIT activities;
- j) Advocate for the control of meningitis in sub-Saharan Africa.

SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES

The committee shall chart the course of MERIT throughout its expected lifetime of a decade. It must:

- a) Establish clear roles and responsibilities for all of the actors in MERIT;
- b) Connect the science opportunities with the validated operational requirements of the public health community;
- c) Determine a key set of operational requirements from the operational public health community, and review and update as required;
- d) Identify regional priorities that are consistent with the operational health communities requirements;
- e) Identify both critical gaps in knowledge and priority areas for MERIT research;
- f) Identify funding requirements and actively engage the donor community to fund key project elements;
- g) Establish a responsive technical review and endorsement process for projects proposing to become part of MERIT with the intent of improving these individual projects and the overall program;
- h) Establish a roadmap for MERIT activities;
- i) Integrate MERIT into other relevant health, environmental, social and economic programs;
- j) Ensure coincidence between MERIT and broader institutional objectives and activities;
- k) Assess risks associated with the project and develop a mitigation strategy to ensure that the MERIT goals are met.

COMMITTEE MEMBERSHIP

Committee membership shall be drawn from those individuals and organizations actively engaged in the work of MERIT. Broad institutional representation is encouraged to cover the range of expertise required; however institutions are asked to provide points of contact within their organizations. The committee shall be self-appointing. Membership shall be for three years with the possibility of renewal. A chair will be elected for one year with the possibility of renewal.

The MERIT project Steering Committee consists of the following:

- a) Agencia Estatal de Meteorología
- b) Climate and Health Working Group (CHWG), Ethiopia *
- c) Group on Earth Observations (GEO) Secretariat
- d) Health and Climate Foundation

- e) International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies
- f) International Research Institute for Climate and Society, Columbia University
- g) Meningitis Vaccine Project
- h) World Health Organization
- i) World Meteorological Organization
- j) Individual members

* CHWG representing collaboration between the Health and Meteorological communities in Africa, with respective Ministries of Health and National Ministries of Health to be invited to country-specific MERIT meetings.

Additional members shall be appointed at any time by agreement of the Steering Committee.

The GEO Secretariat will serve as secretary to the Steering Committee for the initial term.

A list of points of contact for organizations and individual members comprising the Steering Committee shall be maintained separately and updated as required.

OPERATION OF THE COMMITTEE

- a) The committee shall meet as often as required and will conduct most of its business by e-mail. Committee meetings will normally be in Geneva;
- b) All committee meetings shall be public and publicized on the MERIT website;
- c) The committee will maintain a list of all persons interested in, or participating in MERIT;
- d) The committee will establish an online communication platform for all members of the MERIT community to access information and engage in on-line discussions as relevant to achieving the objectives of the MERIT project;
- e) Subject to the availability of funding, the committee will host:
 - a. An annual scientific meeting and capacity building workshop and show progress on projects; and
 - b. A bi-annual donor meeting
- f) Decisions of the committee shall be by simple majority with each institution present casting a single vote. In the event of a tie, the decision of the chair shall prevail;
- g) Voting by proxy is permitted;
- h) Any member of the committee may represent the MERIT project at external meetings.
- i) A small secretariat will assist the committee. In the first instance this will be hosted by the GEO Secretariat.