Zika vírus in the Americas: time to stop ignoring neglected tropical diseases

According to PAHO, Zika virus epidemics have already affected over 25 countries and territories in Central and South America since Zika virus arrival in the Americas early in 2015. Brazil is in the epicentre of this epidemics and national authorities estimate that over half a million cases of Zika fever have occurred in the country since then. Additionally, since October 2015, an increased number of congenital malformations and some deaths in newborn babies have been reported in the same Brazilian municipalities where Zika had circulated earlier. A potential causal association between Zika infection in pregnant women and newborn microcephaly, has been suggested and further investigations are currently under way, with some virological evidence already established. If this causal relationship is fully recognized, thousands of newborn babies in the Americas could be affected and suffer from microcephaly, central nervous system disease and neurodevelopment impairment in the next few years.

The current Zika epidemics in the Americas highlight that control of mosquito borne diseases in low and middle income countries is still an unfinished business. It reminds us that globally, over 50 million people a year still contract Dengue fever, with increased number of fatalities described in countries such as Brazil in the last decade. Additionally, since 2013, Chikungunya virus cases have been circulating in the Americas as well, with over 1.5 million cases of the disease reported to PAHO by mid-2015. The introduction of emerging arboviruses like Chikungunya and Zika in the Americas are facilitated by highly susceptible populations in the continent and also by the massive presence of competent mosquitoes from the Genus Aedes, especially in urban centres. Efforts to control competent vector mosquitoes like *Aedes aegipty* does not figure among the successful stories in the Americas' public health hall of achievements. The continuous presence of Dengue since the 80s and the recent emergence of Zika and Chikungunya are results of this failure in vector control.

Unfortunately, this epidemics tell us an even sadder story. It tells us about the role of inequalities in South and Central America and the burden of communicable and non-communicable diseases for those who are more vulnerable in the society. In a continent with rampant inequalities and where the poor still lack adequate access to health, good housing conditions and education, the burden of arboviral diseases is unlikely to be equally distributed in the population. Similarly, Zika and its potential complications reveals a very important and sensitive public health issue for Latin America, the lack of access to family planning and the

health inequalities surrounding abortion and women rights. Furthermore, it is likely that the heaviest burden of this epidemic will fall on the shoulders of the poor, unmarried, uneducated, rural or slum dwelling, non-white women of the continent.

Successes accomplished by South and Central American countries in the last decades include eliminating or controlling infectious diseases of public health importance and reaching important international targets for maternal and child health. The efforts leading to these achievements are highly commendable. However, in order to face the complex challenge posed by emerging arboviral diseases like Zika, Dengue and Chikungunya, a new and robust commitment will be necessary. Furthermore, the international public health community should be prepared to fully engage in order to support these efforts and guarantee that people in the Americas win the battle against vector borne diseases. Notwithstanding the current and future unpleasant consequences of this Zika epidemic, the opportunity it provides to countries in South and Central America are many and significant. Hopefully, with the support of the international community these countries will recognise this important moment in their public health history and use it as an opportunity to decrease inequalities and improve the health and wellbeing of its population.