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ASIA EDITION

"One example of success is the development of a potential new paediatric treatment for schistosomiasis"

March 1, 2024 | Opinion | By Ayesha Siddiqui

Japan-based Global Health Innovative Technology (GHIT) Fund is a prominent international public-private partnership fund dedicated to advancing global health R&D. GHIT mobilises Japan's industry, academia, and research institutes to develop groundbreaking drugs, vaccines and diagnostics for prevalent diseases like malaria, tuberculosis and neglected tropical diseases, in collaboration with global partners. Mina Ohata, Senior Manager of Brand Communications, GHIT Fund, shares insights into the organisation's mission, strategies and future plans.



Could you give us an overview of the GHIT Fund's mission and how it originated?

The idea for the GHIT (Global Health Innovation Technology) Fund was conceived by Tachi Yamada (former President of Global Health, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and, at that time, Chief Scientific & Medical Officer at Takeda Pharmaceutical Co., Ltd) and BT Slingsby (at that time, Director of Global Access Strategies at Eisai Co. and eventual founding GHIT CEO) at a Japanese soba restaurant in Tokyo in the fall of 2011. The question was how do we leverage Japan’s untapped technology, innovation, and insights to address infectious diseases, such as tuberculosis, malaria, and neglected tropical diseases (NTDs), affecting millions in low- and middle-income countries? The solution they sketched on the back of a paper napkin was a matching fund designed to catalyse global health R&D from and with Japan.

The Government of Japan, Japan’s leading pharmaceutical companies and international foundations then came together to establish the GHIT Fund: an R&D fund to invest in Japanese innovation for global health product development.

Can you share some specific successes or breakthroughs that have resulted from the GHIT Fund's initiatives in terms of drug development, vaccines, or diagnostics for the targeted diseases?

One example of success is the development of a potential new paediatric treatment option by the Paediatric Praziquantel Consortium – the first investigational drug among GHIT's investments to receive a European Medicines Agency's Committee for Medicinal Products for Human Use (CHMP) positive scientific opinion. The opinion was adopted in 2023 for this new paediatric treatment option to treat schistosomiasis in preschool-aged children. Schistosomiasis affects more than 240 million people, about fifty million of whom are preschool-aged children. Japan's Astellas Pharma Inc., as a founding member of the Pediatric Praziquantel Consortium, played a pivotal role by utilising its proprietary technology to lead a potential new paediatric treatment option's initial formulation development, resulting in water dispersible, climate-stable, child-friendly tablets, through improving the taste of the tablets. The formulation was optimised by Merck in Germany; the manufacturing process served to produce clinical trial supply from Merck and Farmanguinhos in Brazil. GHIT is inspired to see Japanese innovation and knowhow join forces with incredible partners worldwide to make a transformational impact on global health.

A second example is that the world's first double-blind, randomised clinical trial to find a treatment for the fungal form of mycetoma, a chronic disabling disease, has demonstrated that fosravuconazole, a new oral treatment which GHIT has invested in since 2017, is safe, patient-friendly, and effective in treating the disease. Drugs for Neglected Diseases initiative (DNDi) coordinated the trial in Sudan in partnership with the Mycetoma Research Center (MRC) in Khartoum, Erasmus MC in the Netherlands, and the Japanese pharmaceutical company Eisai Co., Ltd. The project is now in preparation for the application for approval in Sudan.

Given the importance of public-private partnerships, how does the GHIT Fund foster collaboration and coordination among diverse stakeholders, including Japanese entities and global organisations?

In addition to incentivising collaboration by making collaboration a prerequisite for funding (development partnerships are required to include both Japanese and non-Japanese entities), GHIT has championed a mindset shift for stakeholders worldwide. Our mechanism enables Japanese pharmaceutical companies to combine their R&D expertise and capabilities with those of governments, international organisations, and nonprofits, with negligible risk; conversely, we provide a pathway to collaboration with Japan that many global health stakeholders could not previously access. Finally, we actively bring together innovative previously unconnected partners across borders and sectors, creating an innovation hub to help stakeholders learn from each other while leveraging their unique experience and technologies.

How does the GHIT Fund navigate challenges related to cross-border collaborations, regulatory differences, and varying healthcare landscapes when working on global health solutions?

The first key to effective collaboration is clear and ongoing communication. Additionally, our network of global partners, including companies, international funding agencies, and more, provide important perspectives and insights that facilitate a multitude of creative approaches to collaboration. Our focus on open innovation and transparency is another critical component of effective development partnerships.

How has the GHIT Fund adapted its strategies and priorities in response to emerging global health threats, such as pandemics or the spread of infectious diseases with pandemic potential?

Our investment focus on malaria, TB, and NTDs has been consistent since our founding, but we understand and very much appreciate that the world faces threats beyond our core scope of work and that our diseases of focus do not spread in a vacuum. For that reason, we maintain constant dialogue with global institutions and experts to align our strengths and capabilities with global needs. Our partnership with the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations (CEPI) exemplifies our involvement in the area of pandemic preparedness through partnerships and we continue to look for ways to repurpose familiar technologies for diseases of pandemic potential.

Looking ahead, what are the GHIT Fund's future plans and ambitions?

We launched our third five-year strategic plan in April 2023, with an overarching objective to expedite global health R&D to make essential products available and accessible to those who need them most. The three key pillars of the plan are: galvanise innovation, catalyse partnerships, and maximise impact. To deliver drugs, vaccines and diagnostics to the field more quickly, we will proactively collaborate with product development partners to help them develop robust launch strategies and establish strategic, product-focused partnerships to create an environment for effective access and delivery.

We announced two new partnerships to enhance the strategy with exciting aims. First, GHIT and the Institut Pasteur de Dakar (IPD), a Senegalese non-profit foundation, will foster the development of cutting-edge solutions to combat infectious diseases in Africa and beyond, particularly by strengthening collaboration to support low-cost vaccine and diagnostics manufacturing in LMICs through technology transfer and know-how sharing from/with Japanese pharmaceutical companies and academia. Second, GHIT and the Medicines Patent Pool (MPP), a United Nations-backed public health organisation with expertise in licensing and technology transfer for essential health products, will support effective global health technology transfer in global health and will share knowledge and perspectives on access-oriented licensing and other issues relating to affordable access medical technologies in LMICs.

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