

Press Release

Global Appeal 2026 Highlights Education as the Key to Ending Leprosy Stigma and Discrimination

--Launch Ceremony in Brussels Preceded by Royal Audience--

Jan. 30, 2026 / -- The 2026 Global Appeal to End Stigma and Discrimination Against Persons Affected by Leprosy was launched in Brussels, Belgium on January 29 at an event co-hosted by Education International and the Sasakawa Leprosy (Hansen's Disease) Initiative, in partnership with the Damien Foundation.

Now in its 21st year, the Global Appeal is an annual call to action aiming to mobilize different sectors of society to sign a collective pledge to eliminate the social barriers surrounding leprosy, also known as Hansen's disease. With the participation of Education International, the global voice of teachers and education workers, this year's appeal emphasized the transformative power of education in dispelling myths, reducing prejudice, and promoting inclusion.

On the morning of the event, a delegation of persons affected by leprosy from Brazil, India, and Indonesia participated in a roundtable audience with Her Majesty Queen Mathilde of the Belgians at the Royal Palace in Brussels. At the launch ceremony, Dr. Jean-Pierre Baron Schenkelaars, former President of the Damien Foundation, read out a message from the Queen: "I warmly welcome the Global Appeal 2026, which unites key actors around dignity, inclusion, and the fight against leprosy-related stigma. By linking health, education, and equality, this Global Appeal reflects the spirit of the Sustainable Development Goals and deserves my full support."



A delegation of persons affected by leprosy from Brazil, India, and Indonesia, together with other stakeholders, participated in a roundtable audience with Her Majesty Queen Mathilde of the Belgians © Palais Royal/Koninklijk Paleis – Loan Silvestre

About 80 participants attended the launch event at The Merode, which brought together persons affected by leprosy, educators, policymakers, health professionals, and civil society representatives to reaffirm a shared commitment to dignity, inclusion, and the principle of leaving no one behind.

Dr. Mugwena Maluleke, President of Education International, said, “Education International, representing over 33 million teachers and education support personnel worldwide, reaffirms its commitment to ending stigma and discrimination—including against persons affected by leprosy—through inclusive education, teacher empowerment, and the promotion of human rights and dignity for all learners.”

Mr. Takashi Kajiwara, Vice President of Education International and President of the Japan Teachers’ Union, emphasized that education empowers children to understand invisible threats, break prejudice, and grow up with zero tolerance for discrimination.

The ceremony featured several video messages, including one from Dr. Beatriz Miranda, UN Special Rapporteur on the elimination of discrimination against persons affected by leprosy and their family members. She noted that, although leprosy is curable, discrimination against those affected by the disease persists. “Ending discrimination is a matter of justice, essential for ensuring rights, social inclusion, and peace,” she said.

Another message was from Ms. Stefania Giannini, Assistant Director-General for Education at UNESCO, who said that education is one of the most powerful tools to advance dignity, equality, and social justice. “When teachers are supported and empowered, education becomes a transformative force that challenges fear and misinformation, promotes inclusion and solidarity, and ensures that no learner is left behind,” she said.

Ms. Maguette Ndiaye, Chair of the Oversight Committee of the 3rd Global Forum of People’s Organizations on Hansen’s Disease, spoke on behalf persons affected by the disease. She noted that although leprosy is curable, those who have experienced the disease continue to face stigma and discrimination. “Leprosy does not define a person,” she said, calling for awareness based on accurate information, the elimination of discrimination, and the protection of human rights, as well as collective efforts toward building an inclusive society.

Ms. Pascale Barnich, General Manager, the Damien Foundation, emphasized that “the elimination of leprosy is within reach. To achieve this, we must continue to support research in order to improve diagnosis, strengthen health systems, pursue poverty-reduction programs, and fight judgement and false beliefs that fuel stigma. Education, both here and elsewhere, is key: it can either reinforce exclusion or help build societies where differences are a strength and a force for a fairer world.”

Mr. Yohei Sasakawa, WHO Goodwill Ambassador for Leprosy Elimination, drawing on decades of field visits, emphasized the importance of access to education and the awareness that education brings. He said it was necessary to ensure that children and families affected by leprosy can attend school without barriers, and that communities, teachers, and students are equipped with accurate knowledge to dispel myths and prevent discrimination. “Education is essential to breaking the cycle of poverty and stigma, empowering affected individuals, and building inclusive societies,” he said.

At the conclusion of the ceremony, the Global Appeal 2026 declaration was read aloud by Ms. Bimla Kujur, a person affected by leprosy from India, together with Dr. Mugwena Maluleke. The declaration highlights the role of education in breaking the cycle of stigma and discrimination, promoting knowledge and empathy, ensuring inclusion, and empowering teachers and students to safeguard human rights.



Ms. Bimla Kujur, representing persons affected by leprosy, reads the Global Appeal 2026 declaration together with Dr. Mugwena Maluleke, President of Education International

International.

Two special seminars followed the launch ceremony. Special Seminar 1: Perspectives from the Field, facilitated by Dr. Takahiro Nanri, Sasakawa Leprosy (Hansen’s Disease) Initiative, featured updates on the global leprosy situation and a dialogue with teachers’ union leaders from leprosy-endemic countries and persons affected by leprosy.

Special Seminar 2: Unlocking Education’s Power to End Leprosy-Related Stigma and Discrimination, facilitated by Dr. David Edwards, General Secretary of Education International, was a multi-stakeholder dialogue including representatives from UNESCO, the Damien Foundation, VVOB – education for development, and persons affected by leprosy from Brazil.

Dr. Nanri closed the event by reaffirming the central role of education: “Today, we confirmed one thing: education is the key. To end discrimination and share the truth about leprosy, we must harness the transformative power of education. Today is not the goal but the starting point for our

work to eliminate discrimination once and for all.”

About leprosy

Leprosy, also known as Hansen’s disease, is an infectious disease that primarily affects the skin and peripheral nerves. In 2024, 172,717 new cases were reported worldwide. Although leprosy is curable, delayed diagnosis and treatment can result in permanent disability. Beyond the physical toll, many people who have experienced leprosy continue to face deep-seated stigma and systemic discrimination, which prevents them from participating fully in society.

About Sasakawa Leprosy (Hansen’s Disease) Initiative

The Sasakawa Leprosy (Hansen’s Disease) Initiative is a strategic alliance of WHO Goodwill Ambassador Yohei Sasakawa, the Sasakawa Health Foundation, and The Nippon Foundation for achieving a world without leprosy and problems related to the disease.

Since 1975, the Initiative has contributed over US\$200 million to support national leprosy programs through the WHO. It is also committed to empowering persons affected by leprosy and their organizations. The Initiative has played a key role in raising leprosy as a human rights issue at the UN, resulting in several resolutions to eliminate discrimination against persons affected by leprosy and their families.

About Education International

Education International is the Global Union Federation that brings together organizations of teachers and other education employees from across the world. Through our 375 member organizations, we represent more than 33 million teachers and education support personnel in 180 countries and territories.

About Damien Foundation

Damien Foundation is a Belgian medical non-profit organization that works to support people with **tuberculosis** and skin-related neglected tropical diseases such as **leprosy** and **leishmaniasis**. For over 60 years, we have shared this expertise in the area of **public health** by building solid partnerships wherever we go, to support vulnerable populations and help **advance research**. We work to strengthen healthcare systems in support of, and at the request of, the national authorities of 13 countries.

Our mission is to provide **equal access** to robust health services throughout the world including Belgium, ensuring that no one suffers or dies from diseases that can be **prevented and cured**.