

KUWAIT FUND TO HOST THE SEVENTEENTH SESSION
OF
THE JOINT ACTION FORUM (JAF)

Ouagadougou, 08 December 2011 – the seventeenth session of the Joint action Forum (JAF) of the African Programme for Onchocerciasis Control (APOC) will be held from 12 to 14 December 2011 in Kuwait City, Kuwait.

The JAF is the governing Board of APOC and comprises ministers of health of 20 participating African countries, representatives of multilateral and bilateral donors, non-governmental development organizations, co-sponsoring agencies, research institutions and the private sector. The JAF usually meets once a year in December to review and approve APOC's plans of action and budget, and decide on APOC's strategies, objectives and policies.

The 17th session hosted by the Kuwait Fund will review progress and new developments in onchocerciasis control. A major item on the agenda for this year's session is the elimination of onchocerciasis transmission in Africa

Onchocerciasis is a major cause of blindness in many African countries. About half a million people are blind or visually impaired due to the disease. Onchocerciasis also causes ugly skin disease with depigmentation and severe unrelenting itching.

As a public health problem, the disease is most closely associated with sub-Saharan Africa. More than 99% of all cases of onchocerciasis and onchocerciasis-related blindness are found in Africa. Onchocerciasis occurs in 31 African countries but it is also prevalent in Yemen and Latin America. In the past, fear of blindness led people to move away from the fertile river valleys in the African savannah, reducing agricultural productivity and increasing poverty.

The treatment for onchocerciasis is ivermectin. Ivermectin paralyses and kills microfilariae, relieving intense skin itching and halting the progression towards blindness. A single dose of ivermectin needs to be taken annually to be effective. Ivermectin is at the core of APOC's strategy, which uses community-directed treatment to reach the people who need it.

This is really an exciting time for the APOC partnership. APOC was set up in 1995 to establish sustainable onchocerciasis control programmes in all endemic African countries, and today APOC has surpassed this mandate.

With the proof of principle of elimination of onchocerciasis with ivermectin alone now firmly established, partners are now talking of the shift from control of onchocerciasis to elimination – a most significant development for the African region.

Other important agenda items include strengthening of national health systems and co-implementation, using the APOC strategy, the community-directed intervention (CDI) to deliver other vital health interventions to poor populations in Africa.

APOC is set to close in 2015 and though there have been many significant achievements on the ground, the job is still not done. To safeguard the gains of the billions of US dollars already invested in onchocerciasis control JAF members will also discuss the future of APOC at this session.

Media Contact:

Zainab Akiwumi – akiwumiz@oncho.afro.who.int

Souleymane Kone – kones@ci.afro.who.int

Mona Yassin - Yassinm@emro.who.int

Antoinette Nana - nanaa@oncho.afro.who.int

Ahmad Haidar - ahaidar@KUWAIT-FUND.ORG

APOC website: www.who.int/apoc

African Programme for Onchocerciasis Control,
P. O. Box 01 549, Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso

Tel: + 226 5034 29 59/60