



PRESS RELEASE

WHO, partners review river blindness elimination progress in Africa: The African Development Bank (AfDB) at the centre of the event

05 December 2009/Tunis, Tunisia - The governing board of the World Health Organization (WHO) African Programme for Onchocerciasis Control (APOC), comprising Health Ministers of the participating countries, representatives of donor countries and institutions and other health development partners meets in the Tunisian capital to review progress towards elimination of the scourge of river blindness from the continent.

The Fifteenth session of the Joint Action Forum (JAF), is being hosted from 8-10 December 2009, by the African Development Bank (AfDB) Group, one of the key donors of WHO/APOC, a pro-poor regional programme set up in 1995 by WHO, the World Bank, and other partners, to control onchocerciasis also known as river blindness in 19 African endemic countries, following the success of the Onchocerciasis Control Programme (OCP) in 11 West African endemic countries.

River blindness exacerbates poverty and impedes socio-economic development by indirectly causing low agricultural productivity in the endemic countries.

The Tunis meeting will examine the results of recent studies to evaluate the potential for shrinking the onchocerciasis map of Africa. Also on the agenda is the co-implementation of the control of onchocerciasis, other Neglected Tropical Diseases and malaria within the framework of the strategic plan of action of APOC for the period 2008 – 2015.

In spite of the global economic crisis, the donor community has steadfastly supported APOC's control programme as a successful health enterprise, which strengthens health systems with a bottom up approach, supports primary health care and contributes to the attainment of the Millennium Development Goals by African countries.

It was at the Tunisian capital that WHO and partners held in 1968, the first meeting, ever, for the control onchocerciasis in Africa. That meeting concluded that it was possible to defeat onchocerciasis through control of the black fly vectors by spraying their breeding sites with safe non-residual insecticides. The control programme has since evolved from vertical to horizontal programme, APOC, demonstrating its ability to reach those beyond and at the end of the road where there is extreme poverty and high disease burden.