Five successive meetings marked the first day of the working visit of the Director of the African Programme for Onchocerciasis control (APOC) and his delegation that lasted from 28 April to 2 May, 2014. From the WHO Country Office to the Ministry of Finance, including the Ministry of Public Health and Onchocerciasis control partners, Dr. Jean-Baptiste Roungou voiced boosting messages for the elimination of neglected tropical diseases (NTDs). He received back from his interlocutors a lot of encouragement and promises to contribute to fighting these diseases, in a country where two-thirds of the population are at risk of some of the NTDs including Onchocerciasis, also known as river blindness.

First of all, the Representative of the WHO Office in Cameroon, to whom Dr. Roungou paid a courtesy call in the presence of the Officer in charge of Health System Strengthening, the Financial Assistant and the Officer in charge of Communication and Advocacy of APOC, thanked the Programme Director for the special attention paid to Cameroon and expressed her admiration for the community strategy that has made APOC a flagship programme of the WHO Country Office.

Dr. Charlotte Faty N’diaye reiterated this statement with an offer of collaboration for the development of human resources at the staff weekly coordination meeting. Then, throughout the day, she willingly introduced, at each meeting, the delegation of APOC joined by the Director the disease control at the Department of Public Health, Cameroon and the Coordinator of the National Programme for onchocerciasis control (NOCP).

During these meetings, Dr Roungou recalled that if in nine years, the country received excellent support from the programme with an annual average of 400 million F.CFA allocated through equipment for training, support of field operations and epidemiological evaluations, it has initiated, in turn, some adequate strategies that should be refined to achieve all their goals. This includes, for instance, the challenge of incentives for community directed distributors corresponding to 25 F CFA per person treated about to be taken up by the government. Indeed, the Minister of Public Health has instructed the payment of 100 million out of 300 million F CFA, some outstanding payments accumulated over two years. In addition, an initiative to value the work of health workers in the Littoral Region will soon be documented by APOC.

According to the Director of the Programme, such initiatives should be brought to the forefront of the international scene to serve as models for other APOC participating countries. They could be increased by funding from the private sector with such a wide network in Cameroon.

However, some weaknesses are to be corrected: low therapeutic coverage at some places, inadequacy of qualified human resources in several specific programmes working on NTDs, inadequate and irregular communication between APOC HQ, the WHO Country Office in Cameroon, the Ministry of Health, and NGDO partners. The tardiness in communicating technical and financial reports according to the standards defined in the WHO direct funding agreements (Direct Financial Cooperation) has also been singled out as a threat to the continued funding of the activities. /→2

Dr Charlotte Faty N’diaye: « We would like to be involved in your efforts for development»

WHO Cameroon staff, paying careful attention to the objectives of the visit

APOC Newsletter Special issue : APOC Director’s visit to Cameroun
In order to control NTDs, APOC and its partners in Cameroon are revisiting some obstacles to elimination

In order to achieve better results in onchocerciasis and lymphatic filariasis (LF) elimination and in the control/elimination of other chemotherapy preventive neglected tropical diseases (CTP-NTDs), partners of Onchocerciasis control, gathered around the Director of APOC and the WHO Representative in Cameroon, listed the shortcomings of the cooperation.

From what was heard, these programme partners, who are known to be active everywhere and effective in supporting the development of operational plans of action and above all to be part of the team overseeing the application of drug mass distribution in the field, were even willing to do better in the context of this new year. They represented: Helen Keller International (HKI), Sightsavers, Filariasis and Disease Research Centres (FDRC), Perspective, FAIRMED, International Eye Foundation (IEF), the United Towns and Cities of Cameroon (UTCC), and the Lions Club International Foundation (LCIF).

They identified several barriers to their performance: inadequate number of qualified and available staff at the Ministry of Health with a keen sense of pursuance of results; difficulties in persuading the LCIF donors not to withdraw from Onchocerciasis control; Mayors and municipal authorities not yet aware of the importance of their involvement in supporting CDDs; absence of strong advocacy with policy makers to deepen and finalize the discussion on the status of CDDs and on the minimum packet for them. These are all concerns that caught the attention of the Director of APOC.

They still have much to offer for NTD elimination

At the Ministry of Health, Converging approaches towards the same direction as APOC

«Mr Director of APOC, our approaches converge towards the same direction. Whenever you feel we are moving away, do not hesitate to call our attention." That is how the Minister of Public Health concluded the audience granted to the Director of the African Programme for onchocerciasis control and his delegation on April 28, 2014.

After the presentation of the strengths and challenges of NTD control in Cameroon by Dr Roungou, Minister André Mama Fouda expressed his satisfaction, noting that the commitment made a few years ago is bearing fruits. → /3
... He also noted a similar vision of progress to be made after remarking that the country has acceded to the idea of putting together all the specific programmes under one NTD coordination; he showed interest in the development of a Master Plan, the creation of a national Unit of national Directors, and in addressing the problem of the bonus promised to CDDs. Current concerns revolve around planning NTD control in the budget and granting a formal support to community health workers. The Minister also indicated that he wished that the visit of the Director of APOC be marked by a highlight: the launch of the first coordinated mass treatment campaign for neglected tropical diseases control.

At the Ministry of Finance,

**As a relay person, the Deputy-Minister for Budget will oversee the increase of public health-related budgetary resources**

Invited to deliver his advocacy message, Dr. Jean-Baptiste Roungou presented to the Deputy-Minister for Budget, the elimination of onchocerciasis and lymphatic filariasis as a " handy miracle, provided that additional efforts be made at the national level". According to the current experiments, a national allocation of 250 F CFA, on average, per person treated, as a supplement to the funding of field operations and to the drug costs kindly provided by international donors and pharmaceutical companies, is enough to make this miracle become a reality and get thousands of people out of the vicious circle of disease and poverty. This looks like a paltry sum compared to the high costs allocated for the treatment of other modern-day diseases.

Sensitive to the suffering to which one inhabitant of Cameroon out of two is exposed, Titti Pierre felt that it was necessary to limit the "debt" vis-à-vis community directed distributors and increase funding for neglected tropical diseases (NTDs) control, through the allocation of counterpart funds on the investment budget. The government should take notice of the annual cost of 35 billion F CFA in drug donations. "We are also willing to support the Ministry of Public Health through the creation of a special NTD budget line for 2015 that will also enable an efficient use of these funds". Then, he suggested that the Director of APOC take to the next level advocacy related to the establishment of a voluntary contribution from the Government of Cameroon to the APOC Trust Fund.

**It's happening in Yaoundé !**

Most part of the working visit of Dr. Jean-Baptiste Roungou, Director of the African Programme for Onchocerciasis control, is taking place in Yaoundé, the political Capital of Cameroon. Unlike Douala which served as a port of entry to Portuguese explorers in the fifteenth century, Yaoundé is a plateau surrounded by seven hills with lush vegetation that originally seduced the German colonial administration at the end of the nineteenth century. The city now covers an area of over 300 km2. For its 2.5 million inhabitants and visitors, all the enchantment of Yaoundé lies in the temperate climate that prevails especially at night, and also in the temperate way of life that differs from the more agitated one observed in the port City of Douala.