The Editorial by Paul-Samson Lusamba-Dikassa, APOC Director

When the TTC bell calls for review and adjustment

There are days and times of the year when, around us, one wonders why, more than usual, we spend so much time at work. Thus, twice in the year, when come the months of March and September, dates when the session of the Technical Consultative Committee (TCC) is held, the effort of thinking, concentration and action doubles among the staff facing the preparations for the statutory meeting.

Prior to being subjected to the "scanning" of the group of twelve TCC members, the data of Onchocerciasis control, collected in endemic countries, are put together a long time beforehand and are classified at APOC headquarters with patience and method that speak volumes about the requirements of the next step. However, if the prospect of being evaluated haunts us in these times, it is reassuring to realize that in the end, far from being cold and impermeable censors, the statutory members, researchers, WHO AFRO staff and observers, gathered in the TCC session, are particularly moved by a common and highly constructive mindset, aiming at faster elimination of the disease on the African continent. This special issue of APOC Newsletter brings you to the heart of the main event of mid-September 2012. Enjoy your reading!

The session as seen by the TTC Chair, Prof. Mamoun Homeida from the University of Medical Sciences and Technologies (UMST), Khartoum, Sudan

The discussions focused on consolidating the phase of Onchocerciasis elimination by APOC. We reviewed more than sixty annual technical reports. Summaries of annual technical reports reviewed in Uganda, Cameroon and Nigeria were presented by the chairs of the technical review committees of these countries. Therefore reviewed the reports by series, some of which were examined directly and others were reviewed online, while still others were reviewed by other committees. We also reviewed research presentations. In sum, more than a hundred documents were reviewed during the session.

The second major focus was on how to strengthen the work on the ground in several countries. You know, if we strive for elimination, we must pay attention to details and details here consist of good therapeutic coverage that should reach 80%, and maintaining a high level of geographic coverage of 100%.

We discussed the challenges faced by the programme in some countries. In this regard, we listened to the report of the Director on his visit to some countries in Central Africa. If you look at the elimination map, you will find that these countries do not make their way towards elimination in 2025. This is why TCC has given some guidance on how to strengthen their programmes. One of the important things to remember is that TCC approved APOC’s decision to boost the community directed treatment with ivermectin in South Sudan which, as we know, is recovering from armed conflict with some eight million people at risk of Onchocerciasis.

Moreover, what was to be done as regards the countries of the former OCP was discussed. How to provide support so that they are not affected again by the disease?

Finally, it should be noted that TCC meetings are always intense and arduous with high level discussions, and that TCC sticks to its role of advisory body that provides technical expertise to APOC, which, I think, enables APOC to consolidate its action in the best way, as it is doing now. ✴

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TCC: a careful and meticulous planning by PRO

Under the supervision of both the Office of the Director’s Coordinator and the Director of the Programme himself, Yaovi AHOLOU, Programme Officer in charge of Meetings (PRO) and Rose Kaboré, his assistant, are responsible for the detailed planning of the Technical Consultative Committee meeting (TCC). Three months prior to the meeting, based on a list of CTDI projects’ annual technical reports provided by the Epidemiology and Vector Elimination Unit (EVE), he forwards letters signed by the Director to countries, asking them to send these reports to APOC Management on due dates that are July 31 for the September session, and January 31 for the March session. A list of reviewers is prepared, taking into account their neutrality with regard to the technical report to be reviewed.

Then follow the invitations sent to statutory members of TCC, researchers, WHO AFRO staff, and observers. With the support of the Travel Service, flights are booked, travel authorizations are prepared, and tickets are purchased and sent to participants. Reservations of hotel rooms are also made. The draft agenda of the meeting is prepared and sent to COORD and to all Heads of Unit in APOC. Four weeks before the TCC session, projects’ technical reports are forwarded to statutory members for consideration, the ideal being that this exercise should be done by the same people who had already reviewed them once in the past.

On the eve of their arrival in Ouagadougou, an impressive pile of these reports is left at the hotel for each participant. During the meeting, PRO is in charge of the secretariat and participates in the preparation of the report in a group of four rapporteurs. Again, the collective painstaking results is a voluminous document that the participants quickly review at the end of the meeting. Then the most accurate observations are made in the extracts sent to the statutory members, one week after the TCC session. Extracts from the report are then sent to NOTFs in different countries for the projects so that they address the concerns and observations of TCC. The final report is sent to participants and countries, one month after the TCC session.

Finally, shall I say ‘See you at the next session?’ Certainly not! That is not all, regarding PRO’s job: two other meetings are looming on the horizon, those of the National Onchocerciasis Task Forces and the Joint Action Forum. Let’s keep the momentum!

Theresa Beloba

TCC members or observers and people in charge of proper governance of APOC, they all talk about lessons learnt

Roger Peck, research scientist, Diagnostic Solutions, PATH, Seattle, USA

“This is the first time I travelled to Ouagadougou. I made a presentation on progress made for 16 years in developing a rapid test for the elimination of Onchocerciasis. It was a great opportunity to make this presentation and actually get a feedback from the participants. And they responded to the work done, on what could be possibly done, and how we could move forward together. It is really encouraging.”

Dr Edridah Muheki TUKAHEBWA, Uganda TRC chair, Vector Control Division, Ministry of Health, Kampala, Uganda

“I am impressed by the way APOC organizes the implementation of all these committees. As Acting Minister of Health and NTD control Programme Focal Point, I would like to borrow a leaf from APOC and apply its methods to NTD control in Uganda.”

Dr Tony Ukety, Responsible Officer, NGDO Coordination Group for Onchocerciasis Control, WHO, Geneva, Switzerland

“I am reassured that partnership has been highlighted so that each one’s contribution may be known. With regard to the Democratic Republic of the Congo, a country I know pretty well, I was able to clarify some issues.”

Dr Michel Boussinesq, Institut de Recherche pour le Développement (IRD), Montpellier, France

“The recommendations of the Joint Action Forum (JAF) provide guidance towards expanding the Programme operations to other neglected tropical diseases, but it is to be feared that the effectiveness of APOC, as Onchocerciasis control Programme, might be reduced due to this expansion. A well-known saying goes: “Grasp all, lose all.” The reorganization at the level of WHO / AFRO and the strategic plan will be submitted by the Management of APOC to the next JAF, and one is somewhat in a position of “Walt and Woe”. As a researcher, I fear that things might be dramatic, if the project on resistance in which I am involved, thanks to TDR and funding from APOC, was to be compromised by budgetary constraints.”

Dr Fanne Mahamat Ousmane, Public Health Specialist, Deputy permanent Secretary of the NOCP, Executive secretary of the NOTF, Yaoundé, Cameroon

“Invited as official from the Ministry of Public Health of Cameroon and participant for the first time in APOC TCC, I presented the technical annual reports of the activities carried out by the NOCP/Cameroun. My impressions are really good regarding all the presentations made in the plenary session during which some reports were accepted and others rejected, followed each time by explanations and recommendations.”

Prof. Ekanem Braide, Chairperson of the Nigeria Technical Review Committee, Federal University, Lafia, Nasarawa State, Nigeria

“While some projects successfully evolve towards elimination, some older ones face difficulties within the communities because the treatment began a long time ago. People are healthier and tend to neglect taking Mectizan. Hence, the problems of absenteeism and refusal that need to be addressed. Each TCC is a step towards the development of APOC, and this session was very fruitful.”
Dr Rosalie Louise Aboutou, Ophthalmologist/MOH/ Delegate of Public Health for the Central region, Ministry of Public Health of Cameroon

“This TCC session served as a framework for very informative discussions and for quite an accurate guidance provided to all countries, especially for those whose performance is poorer and poorer, in order to push everyone to make more efforts towards elimination. Accordingly, members have not been soft on the review of the reports. But it was for didactic purpose, if one may say so.”

Dr Imboua Niava Lucile Marie P., WHO Inter-Country Team Coordinator for Central Africa, Libreville, Gabon

“Invited for the first time to attend TCC, I especially learnt a lot. I have noticed that all the problems that we face in implementing other programmes are also found in the Onchocerciasis programme, as well as in malaria and HIV/AIDS control. Since WHO AFRO has developed a regional strategy to control the neglected tropical diseases, I think this will allow us to establish the necessary bridges for implementation. It is particularly important that no one should be confined to their own bubble any longer.”

Dr André Yébakima, Medical Entomologist, Mosquito control Centre, Fort-de-France, Martinique

“What I particularly liked this year is that when we pass from the control to the elimination of Onchocerciasis, TCC should take up more and more key issues. It is true that reviewing country reports is good, but discussing research problems, absenteeism and incentives will provide further support to the Management of APOC. Having intense and contradictory debates will help us move forward.”

Dr Peter Enyong, Kumba, Cameroon (member from 2001 to 2007)

“The TCC session has been very intense as regards the assessments, the lessons learnt and the future of the projects. It is a little unfortunate that the number of projects to be considered is broad in relation to the agenda, to the point of not allowing us to move forward as we should. But I can assure you that overall, it was a good session.”

Fatu Yumkella, Managing Director, Dalan Development Consultants (DDC), Freetown, Sierra Leone

“You know, the strategic plan is the document that provides us with the guidelines for the future, and as far as I am concerned, the time allocated for this document was short. Our work as TCC members also included a review of projects and how they develop. Our satisfaction to see a lot of them move towards the desired coverage rate for the elimination of the disease is high.”

Dr Kisito Ogoussan, Associate Director, Onchocerciasis, Mectizan Donation Program, Decatur, GA, USA

“We are pleased with the responses provided by the Management of APOC to our previous recommendations and with the attendance observed in fieldwork so that things may move in the right direction. Because we were able to technically evaluate the performance of the actions in the field, we’re happy being here. It was the purpose of our journey here.”

Dr Annette KUESEL, Scientist, WHO/TDR, Geneva, Switzerland

“I have provided updated data of the research we are doing for onchocerciasis control, which is generally funded or co-funded by APOC. As in all TCC and JAF sessions, it was very important for me, not so much for the results that I send, but because I am interested in the context in which these results are applicable. It is also important for the way in which we manage projects, how we talk to researchers and the way we approach things.”

Mrs Francisca Onyekachi Olamiiju, Executive Director, MITOSATH, Jos, Plateau State, Nigeria

“We followed the recommendations of the last FAC and the Management of APOC submitted a strategic plan on which we made our observations. In addition, there are challenges to be taken up in some countries such as Angola, South Sudan weakened by conflicts, and we are seeking how to address these issues together with our partners. We are pleased to be associated with it.”

Dr Doulaye Sacko, Coordinator Vision 2020, West African Health Organization, Bobo-Dioulasso, Burkina Faso

“With the results obtained so far, we are completely in the context of the elimination of Onchocerciasis in Africa. These were very interesting debates, TCC members are people who have already convincingly shown their experience, their commitment and love for what they do. Everyone objectively defends everything related to Onchocerciasis control and to the elimination of the disease, I would say.”

Mme Christelly Flore Badila, Technical Assistant, SightSavers Abidjan, Côte d’Ivoire

“This is the first time I attended TCC, I already had an idea of it, I am very positively impressed. The presentations on project reports, the comments and recommendations made will enable me to get involved better in the field. At the time when I am about to take my position as technical assistant of SightSavers in Abidjan, I think my commitment and efficiency will be increased.”
Prof. Mamadou Sounkalo Traoré, Secrétaire Général du Ministère de la Santé publique, Bamako, Mali

"I have been attending TCC sessions for six years. The special thing about this session is that we worked a little more on the 2015 - 2025 strategic plan, although it has not been as long as I wished it could be, because that’s what the future of the Programme is about."

Dr. Mary Amuyunzu-Nyamongo, African Institute for Health and Development, Nairobi, Kenya

"What I liked in this session is that we have openly discussed the strategic plan. I think the role of critics that we endorse helps APOC find good interests and provides it with guidance on NTDs and other health issues in which countries are more and more interested. I appreciate the efforts of APOC Management in preparing TCC. The Management is aware of the fact that we will ask questions. I am really pleased even though we had to work very fast due to time constraint."

Dr. Michael Thiede, Consultant au Scenarium Group, Lohengrinschr, Berlin, Germany

"Of course, there have been good results from Onchocerciasis control so far, but I think a lot more needs to be done and everyone is prepared to meet the challenges. What is very nice is that the TCC team is multidisciplinary, with members from different backgrounds who can effectively address the challenges of Onchocerciasis elimination."

They strived for the success of the meeting: