MEETING OF THE NATIONAL COORDINATORS FOR ONCHOCERCIASIS CONTROL IN AFRICA

The common outline of a journey ahead

The ninth meeting of the national coordinators for Onchocerciasis control, gathered together for the first time, the representatives of the African Programme for Onchocerciasis control (APOC) and those of the former Programme of Onchocerciasis control in West Africa (OCP) in Ouagadougou from 24 to 28 September 2012.

The editorial by Dr Paul-Samson Lusamba-Dikassa, Director of APOC
Harmony for a better shift from Onchocerciasis control to its elimination in Africa

The African Programme for Onchocerciasis control (APOC) has just gone through a constructive experience in Ouagadougou, notably that of getting together in the same and unique place, national officials in charge of the control of this disease from 27 APOC countries and from the member countries of its ancestor, the former OCP. In contrast to the previous years when the two groups used to contrast their experiences of the disease control separately, discussions took place simultaneously this time.

This meeting had a twofold objective, namely the situational analysis of operations carried out towards the objective of eliminating Onchocerciasis in Africa and the preparation of national plans to submit to the Joint Action Forum, our governing body, for approval in December 2012.

Challenge met, as the meeting in Ouagadougou, contributed to highlighting the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and means to apply the entomo-epidemiological evaluations, and also to developing the drafts of the national plans of action for Onchocerciasis control, thanks to several communications and discussions.

However, despite the instructive character of the lessons learnt from the activities carried out in the field and the encouraging results, there is no question of indulging ourselves: the battle for elimination is still long and full of difficulties of all kinds: human, material and financial. Hence the exhortation to all the players of Onchocerciasis control to join their efforts for accurate evaluations, strengthening health systems and addressing cross-border issues. The socio-economic future of our continent relies on that and countries that can provide excellent results will progressively be withdrawn from the list of endemic countries.

A common thread managed by a methodical chair of the session:
Dr Edward Kirumbi, Programme Officer NTD Control Programme, Dar-es-Salaam, Tanzania

“What I remember from the meeting of the National Coordinators for Onchocerciasis control from 27 countries, joined by some representatives of NGDOs, is that it was really very constructive for the participants both in terms of awareness related to the shift in the direction from Onchocerciasis control to elimination and in terms of the development of national strategic plans for the elimination of Onchocerciasis in Africa by 2025.”

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To refine the Onchocerciasis control methods, National coordinators have turned to a good source in Ouagadougou

The meeting of the national representatives for Onchocerciasis control in Africa was held in the context of a new challenge represented by Onchocerciasis elimination. At the opening of the session, Dr Paul-Samson-Lusamba Dikassa, APOC Director, at the opening session, stressed the determination of the Joint Action Forum (JAF) to assist member countries to achieve the new objective, in exchange for large efforts they would provide to cover the technical aspects, the training of community distributors and health staff, treatment and joint implementation with other neglected tropical diseases (NTDs).

In addition, Dr. Doulaye Sacko, Coordinator of Vision 2020 in West Africa, Programme for the West African Health Organization (WAHO), congratulated APOC for embarking on such a difficult path of Onchocerciasis elimination and reiterated the commitment of WAHO to provide its support to the joint efforts made by the Management of APOC and the national programmes for the control of river blindness.

The reflection, structured in the form of presentations followed by questions and answers, was instructive and resulted in conclusions and recommendations made in order to boost Onchocerciasis control in Africa. But for the Director of APOC, expressing himself at the close of the meeting, much remains to be done in the area of evaluations that will require external close monitoring. Similarly, he added, strengthening the community health system will still be crucial even after the elimination of Onchocerciasis. Finally, as regards the national plans of action that will be presented at the 18th session of the JAF in December 2012, Dr Paul-Samson Lusamba-Dikassa hoped that countries will require, in advance, the partners’ support for developing them.

At the end of his statement, he warmly thanked the WAHO for its collaboration with APOC, Dr. Philippon Bernard, for his role of observer at the Technical Consultative Committee meetings, the representatives of NGDOs to their attention as well as the interpreters for being patient. ♦ Thérèse Belabo

Doctor Bernard Philippon, Member of the Technical Consultative Committee, Paris, France: The eye of an observer

"In my opinion, this is one of the most interesting meetings that one can ever attend, in the sense that this is a unique opportunity to meet, to listen, to interact with almost all the coordinators of the Programme, and with some other key players involved in Onchocerciasis control who are the representatives of NGOs. People who are daily confronted with problems in the field can share their problems, their concerns, their satisfaction, their needs, and interact with their colleagues they do not always have the opportunity to meet. By benefitting from the experience of each other, that is the way, in my opinion, how APOC can make progress better, because the danger for big programmes is precisely diversity and extension. What I'd say to TCC is to encourage more vivid communication among people, instead of being unaware of their work only through reports” ♦

Some participants’ views:

Dr Mamadou Oumar Traoré, National Coordinator/NOCP, Bamako, Mali:

"After more than 20 years of Onchocerciasis control in Mali, we can say that the situation is really satisfactory. This has been confirmed by a study that we conducted on the feasibility of Onchocerciasis elimination in two endemic areas of our country where, after 10-15 years of ivermectin treatment, a rigorous monitoring system must be put in place to maintain the gains. In this regard, despite the crisis the country is going through currently, it is desirable that Mali should continue to benefit from the financial and technical support of our privileged partner, APOC, alongside the support of other NGO partners (SSI, HKI, OPC, etc) that have been in the country for several years." ♦
Ms. Peace Habumugisha, Country representative of the Carter Center, Kampala, Uganda

"We talked about a lot of topics: the CDTI in the projects, the shift from control to elimination, entomological research that we were not aware of. So, I think the meeting was very informative. Uganda has benefited greatly from it because we are in a period of elimination. As a representative of an NGO in Uganda, I was able to learn about what other countries do and I have had an idea of what will be presented at JAF 18. I really learnt a lot from this meeting and I thank the Management of APOC for inviting me to this session." ♦

Dr Benjamin Didier Biholong, National Coordinator of the National Onchocerciasis control Programme (NOCP), Executive Secretary of the NOTF, Ministry of Public Health, Yaoundé, Cameroon

"This meeting is a great opportunity for sharing experiences between the countries. As you are aware, APOC countries are relatively young compared to those belonging to the former OCP that have proven experience in Onchocerciasis control. The discussions led to the adoption of the best strategies to eliminate Onchocerciasis. As regards the epidemiological situation of Onchocerciasis in Cameroon, it has improved significantly thanks to the community directed treatment with ivermectin. Before, more than ten million people were exposed to Onchocerciasis, six million people infected including 32,000 people were suffering from blindness. The ten regions of the country, provided with 110 health districts, were affected. Since 1998, with APOC support, we have conducted studies that show blindness or skin diseases in sharp decline. Impact studies focused on eight sites with unsatisfactory results in two sites co-endemic for loiasis. We continue to reflect on the specific activities to be carried out in terms of strengthening CDTI." ♦

Dr Y. A. Saka, National Coordinator of the National Onchocerciasis control Programme, Ministry of Health, Abuja, Nigeria

"For the first time, we met between APOC member countries and ex-OCP countries. Previously, we held meetings separately. A real move that allows us to talk together about the elimination of Onchocerciasis in Africa. I hope it will continue." ♦

The facilitators: They mostly provided explanation

Dr Laurent Yaméogo, Coordinator of the Office of APOC Director, Ouagadougou

"I made a presentation on the entomological situation. To understand why the entomological evaluation is conducted, it should be noted that for a person to be infected by Onchocerciasis or the river blindness, the black fly, also called Simulium, which is an insect (hence the term entomology), will have to transmit to the person (take the parasite from an infected person to inoculate another person who, after several bites of black flies that carry the parasite, will develop Onchocerciasis). It is important therefore, if we want to know if the transmission no longer continues (is interrupted), to verify that the black fly no longer carries parasites and therefore cannot transmit the disease to humans. Because flies first develop in rivers and generally live on the edge, this is where we must go and do sampling, the collection of blackflies' samples. These flies can be dissected / tested on the spot to see if they carry the parasite, or they could also be sent to a specialized laboratory of molecular biology so that screening (testing) should be done with quite sophisticated means but fairly widespread nowadays known as DNA probes." ♦

Dr Mounkaila Noma, Chef, Unité Epidémiologie et Elimination du Vecteur, APOC, Ouagadougou

"The most important thing was to set a clear timetable, that is, the transition from Onchocerciasis control to its elimination. We believe that concerted action on the continent in which one does not make a distinction between West Africa, Southern Africa, North Africa or East Africa will constitute the greatest gains ever made. This is the beginning of another type of work. First, the report of the meeting will be finalized and the document will be immediately released in two languages, it will be published in the Weekly Epidemiological Records of WHO and will be posted on the APOC website. A working group will prepare the four country presentations at the Joint Action Forum in December 2012 in Burundi on the financial contributions of the governments and NGOs, the treatment with ivermectin and co-implementation, the training of community distributors and health workers. So, countries by themselves will be able to show: (1) the impact of the operations to the donors, (2) the scientific evidence for moving from Onchocerciasis control to its elimination and (3) express their willingness to move from Onchocerciasis control to elimination." ♦

Dr Afework Hailemariam, Epidemiologist, Epidemiology and Vector Elimination Unit, APOC, Ouagadougou

"Regarding the epidemiological evaluations results for the period starting from 2008 to 2011, during which eleven countries were evaluated: These countries are: Nigeria, Chad, Cameroon, Uganda, Ethiopia, Tanzania, Malawi, DRC, CAR, Congo and Burundi. In total, about 31 projects were evaluated, of which 27 had a satisfactory status, moving towards elimination in contrast to the other four, namely, one in Nigeria (Ondo State), two in Cameroon (Centre and Littoral) and one in DRC (Sanion). After the discussions that followed the presentation, the solutions proposed were meant to strengthen the CDTI, and address cross-border issues discussed." ♦
Dr. François Sobela Health Systems Specialist
Unit of Sustainable Drug Distribution, APOC

"Following other colleagues and the facilitation team of the Management of APOC, my remarks focused on the contribution of the APOC Programme to strengthening the health system. I tried to summarize what the programme has done so far in the countries in strengthening the health system in connection with the six pillars of the health system strengthening and the nine priority areas outlined in the Ouagadougou Declaration on primary health care and primary health care systems in Africa, namely: Leadership and Governance for Health Services Provision, Human Resources, Funding of Health and social Welfare, Health Information, Health Technologies, Community Ownership and Participation, Partnerships for Health Development, and Research for Health. Countries were invited to express their expectations to the Management of APOC regarding health system strengthening. This support from APOC will be based on their needs and guidelines to complement what is being done by the other partners in the countries."

Dr. Laurent Toe, Biologist, in Charge of the MDSC/DNA Laboratory, Temporary Adviser, APOC

"There have been discussions on elimination and the MDSC Molecular Biology Laboratory happened to be a focal point for entomology. Entomology is the key to decide whether, indeed, there is interruption of the transmission. We made a contribution on how to organize this work and under what conditions it should be done. We encouraged countries to provide consistent data that can be used by the programme to determine the elimination in the foci. This was also the opportunity to meet representatives of the countries of the former COA with whom we maintain fruitful and courteous working relationships courteous that we want to strengthen. Commitments have been made with a solid foundation to continue. We will always be there to provide our support."

The interpreters

Ever faithful to their duty!

A winning team: A painstaking work that pays off

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