Eighteen universities from the 12 countries that attended the meeting in Abuja, revised and adopted a draft CDI curriculum and training module developed by APOC, in collaboration with the West African Health Organization (WAHO) and the Regional Institute for Public Health in the Republic of Benin.

Some universities will introduce the CDI strategy into their curricula by 2009/10, while others will start in the 2010/11 session.

The National Universities Commission (or its equivalent) of each country is also encouraged to support and promote the CDI programme.

The participants resolved to advocate for the use of the CDI strategy for multiple health interventions, including distribution of insecticide-treated bed nets, anti-malarial drugs and promotion of maternal health.

This strategy is now an important tool for extending primary healthcare -- Dr Margaret Chan, WHO Director-General.
The Honourable Minister of State for Health of Nigeria, Dr Aliyu Idi Hong, who declared the meeting open, said it had been proven that health interventions succeeded better when community members were involved in the planning and implementation processes.

The success of the community-directed intervention (CDI) strategy introduced by APOC for the effective control of river blindness hinges on the active participation of communities and particularly the commitment of Community-Directed Distributors (CDDs).

These estimated 600,000 trained volunteers, selected by their own communities, deliver ivermectin, a safe drug for the treatment of river blindness, to their own people. Before APOC introduced the CDI strategy in 1997, less than 2 million people were treated per year. But thanks to the dedication of communities and the distributors, many of whom trek more than 20-km to deliver the drugs to their peers in hard-to-reach villages, communities now treat close to 60 million people annually.

To acknowledge and show appreciation to these unpaid distributors, APOC has produced two films, shot in onchocerciasis-endemic villages in Burkina Faso and Tanzania.

Amity Meria, a music star in Burkina Faso and Upendo Kilahiro, a popular musician in Tanzania, both featured in the films thanking CDDs across Africa for their contributions to primary healthcare. The two singers accompanied the CDDs, singing and dancing, as they delivered health commodities, including ivermectin, insecticide-treated bed nets, anti-malarial and vitamin A to endemic communities. The films are in Swahili, Julla, English and French (visit www.who.int/apoc).

“I am greatly honoured to be part of the distribution,” declared CDD, Mr Soma Nestor of Burkina Faso.

Highlighting the importance of proactive global health initiatives, the WHO Director-General Dr Margaret Chan, in a recent statement, commended the onchocerciasis control programme for introducing the community directed strategy in a large scale.

“This strategy is now an important tool for extending primary healthcare,” she said.

The Abuja meeting is seen as a practical demonstration of how to maximize the benefits of the positive health-education synergies to strengthen health systems.

As resource-poor countries struggle to attain the health-related Millennium Development Goals, the CDI strategy has shown itself to be a tried and tested cost-effective tool that can be used to improve primary healthcare with strong community participation for better all-round outcome.

Unsung Heroes: Community-Directed Distributors (CDDs)

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“I am greatly honoured to be part of the distribution,” declared CDD, Mr Soma Nestor of Burkina Faso.

We love the CDDs, and we are very proud of them. These are the stars, the unsung heroes — APOC Director, Dr Uche Amazigo.