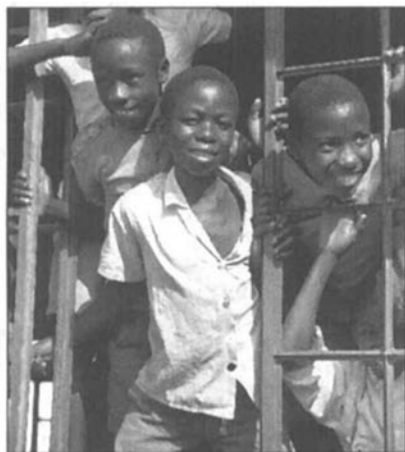


waterpoints

New WHO offensive against river blindness

Building on a sustained decades-long effort that has today all but eliminated onchocerciasis ('river blindness') in 11 countries of West Africa, the World Health Organisation (WHO) is now embarking on an ambitious new programme which aims to control and eventually eliminate the disease as a



Heldur NetocnyPanos Pictures

health hazard from the entire continent.

The new initiative, the African Programme for Onchocerciasis Control (APOC), was launched in December 1995 at a conference hosted by the World Bank, the programme's leading sponsor and, as we go to press, is becoming operational.

APOC will directly benefit more than 15 million people who are infected with onchocerciasis, in 16 participating countries: Angola, Burundi, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Ethiopia, Gabon, Liberia, Malawi, Nigeria, Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda, and Zaire. Nearly 100 million people are estimated to be at risk from the disease.

As APOC's executing agency, WHO will provide overall technical guidance and co-ordination, working in close co-operation with the Bank, participating governments, bilateral donors, and non-governmental development organizations (NGDOs). WHO is preparing APOC's technical framework based on intensive research in Africa.

The pharmaceuticals firm Merck & Co. will provide the drugs on which the programme's control strategy is based, free of charge.

Severe symptoms

Onchocerciasis is the second leading infectious cause of blindness in APOC countries, and other common symptoms include severe skin diseases, chronic itching, and debilitation.

Onchocerciasis is commonly known as 'river blindness' because of its most severe manifestation, and because the blackfly that transmits the disease abounds in fertile riverine areas, which are avoided by people who fear becoming infected.

APOC was inspired by the Onchocerciasis Control Programme (OCP), also headed by WHO, which began in 1974 and now covers 11 countries in West Africa. It has relied mainly on the application of insecticides through aerial spraying to destroy blackfly larvae in fast-flowing rivers, thereby breaking the cycle of transmission. The reservoir of infective parasites has died out in seven of the countries, and will be virtually eliminated in the others by the year 2002.

OCP ranks among the largest and most successful human disease-control programmes anywhere in the world. The programme has reduced the number of infected people in the operations area from 1.5 million to practically nil, and prevented as many as 200 000 cases of blindness. In addition to these health benefits, WHO says that OCP has opened enough land for resettlement and cultivation to feed an estimated 17 million people with indigenous technology and farming practices.

The new programme will employ spraying very selectively. Instead,

sustainable, community-based ivermectin-treatment activities in the 16 participating countries. WHO's current strategy calls for yearly administration of single doses of the drug to infected populations. As the drugs are free, the main costs will be in delivering the treatment; these will be borne by the countries concerned, and by the NGDOs involved in implementation.

For more information, contact Michael Luhan, Health Communications and Public Relations, WHO. Fax: +49 22 791 4858; or Dan Epstein, Public Information, Pan-American Health Organization, Washington DC, USA. Fax +1 202 861 3143.

An abstract problem — can you help?

We have received a request from Stephen Hussey, Co-ordinator of the Water Workshops Programme in southern Zimbabwe. Water development is undertaken through sand-abstraction schemes, the design and manufacture of simple handpumps, and the construction or refurbishment of weirs, wells, and small dams. The programme also assists in the siting, planning, and establishment of family gardens, and in trying to develop water-transport methods so that crops can be grown under irrigation.

Stephen writes: 'With increasingly bad rainy seasons we have to look at different sources of water. One of our greatest successes has been drawing water from dry, sandy riverbeds — 'sand abstraction'. I am trying to find

Widening the web

Intermediate Technology

The Intermediate Technology Website contains information about what ITUK is doing, and new books and journals contents from IT Publications. If you have access to a computer which can look at the World Wide Web, the location to look for is:
<http://www.oneworld.org/itdg/>

World Water Council

Anyone interested in issues related to 'the efficient, sustainable conservation and management of water' is invited to access information on activities of the World Water Council (WWC) — the international NGO 'whose principal task is to promote awareness about critical water issues to decision-makers including the general public. The WWC, through its members, will work to influence, encourage and assist societies throughout the world to conserve water resources and to ensure that any use of water is equitable and ecologically sustainable.' Access information about WWC activities at: URL:<http://cec.org/english/resource/lucn.htm>.

APOC will promote systematic use of the drug ivermectin as the primary means for control. Although ivermectin has only limited impact on transmission, it kills the larval worms which cause blindness and other symptoms of onchocerciasis in infected people.

APOC's primary goal is to establish

out all I can about this form of water harvesting ... has anyone, anywhere in the world, experience that they could share?

Contact Stephen at: Dabane Trust Water Workshops, PO Box 3331, Bulawayo, Zimbabwe. Fax: +263 9 44775. E-mail: dabane@mango.zw.