

# The Onchocerciasis Elimination Program for the Americas: a history of partnership

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The decision in 1987 by the ~~v3Ea[ (th) -27(par) 27na(e) -27 eutise~~ charge to river blindness control program has challenged the international public health community to find effective ways to distribute the drug to rural populations most affected by onchocerciasis in the Americas. PAHO responded to that challenge by calling for the elimination of all morbidity from onchocerciasis from the Region by the year 2007 through mass distribution of ivermectin. Since 1991, a multinational, multiagency partnership (consisting of PAHO, the endemic countries, nongovernmental development organizations, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta, Georgia as well as academic institutions and funding agencies) has developed the political, financial, and technical support needed to move toward the realization of that goal. This partnership is embodied in the Onchocerciasis Elimination Program for the Americas (OEPA), which is supported by the River Blindness Foundation (RBF) and now by the Carter Center. OEPA was conceived as a means of maintaining a regional initiative to eliminate what is otherwise a low priority disease.

Since its inception in 1993, the OEPA has provided more than US\$ 2 million in financial, managerial and technical assistance to stimulate and/or support programs in Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Guatemala, Mexico, and Venezuela as well as to take full

ministration without the fear of adverse reactions (2–4). This decision was reached upon recognizing that the populations who could most benefit from ivermectin were also the least able to afford the drug. Since ivermectin, however, is not curative—it kills microfilariae but not the adult worms—ivermectin delivery programs must provide the drug regularly (once or twice



Development (USAID), the CDC, the Government of Spain, and NGOs interested in primary eye care (Helen Keller International, Christoffel Blindenmission, and the International Eye Foundation). After many scientific presentations and deliberations, several key conclusions (below) influenced the course of the regional initiative for the next 5 years (9).

the Americas using ivermectin community-based treatment. Furthermore, the international momentbirds

Elimination of onchocerciasis from the Americas. Based on scientific evidence, onchocerciasis can be eliminated from



regional approach for several reasons.  
First,

joint action. At the first SPC meeting in March 1992, the River Blindness Foundation announced its intention to commit US\$ 1 million as seed funding to set the regional initiative in motion. The money was to be held in an RBF-controlled trust fund, with the SPC determining the criteria and standards for allocating funds to help each country develop and implement a plan of action consistent with the regional strategy. With RBF funding in hand, the SPC outlined a strategy for launching the initiative.

It was hoped that the regional initiative would move from the planning stage to achievement of ivermectin distribution in all six countries by 1993. As a first step, regional norms were developed for establishing baseline indices and standard components of ivermectin distribution programs. A series of task force meetings of experts led to normative planning. The first such meeting, held in March 1992, produced standard guidelines for the epidemiologic characterization of endemic areas and evaluation of impact. Other meetings followed (see Table 1). The second step was to stimulate the production of official national plans of

action for the six national onchocerciasis elimination programs. During the period April through June 1992, SPC delegations traveled to all six countries to meet with key political and ministerial figures to request their help in the preparation of plans consistent with the new regional norms. The delegations explained PAHO Resolution XIV calling for a regional initiative to eliminate onchocerciasis with sustainable ivermectin distribution as the key strategy. The delegation urged that national plans and budgets be developed in time for presentation at the second Inter-American Conference on Onchocerciasis to be held later that year. Working meetings in Ecuador, Guatemala, Mexico, and Venezuela helped national experts and responsible Ministry of Health officials to come together to work on the plans.

#### Inter-American Conference on Onchocerciasis '92 and the Onchocerciasis Elimination Program for the Americas

The goal of the second Inter-American Conference on Onchocerciasis

(IACO '92), which took place in Ecuador in September of 1992, was the approval of national plans and budgets. Despite the Strategic Planning Council's efforts of the previous months, however, most plans required further work and could not be fully funded. In addition, it was obvious that the SPC would face increasingly complicated and varied expectations, technical needs, and financial proposals. Because the SPC consisted of some 20 members serving on a voluntary basis, it was incapable of responding to the growing challenges of establishing the regional program. The Strategic Planning Council concluded at its IACO '92 meeting that a part of the RBF donation should be used to establish two staff positions to serve as its secretariat and to travel as advocates of Resolution XIV of the Directing Council of PAHO. Thus, the SPC announced to the assembled IACO '92 body the launching of the office of the Onchocerciasis Elimination Program for the Americas. The OEPA headquarters was established in Guatemala in January 1993, and its first director and expert advisor immediately began visiting the six endemic countries to facilitate the preparation of more thorough national plans and budgets. At the same time, a vigorous fundraising campaign for the OEPA was initiated by the River Blindness Foundation.

#### The OEPA and its coordinating bodies

It was decided not to spend the time or money to establish OEPA as a "legal" NGDO. Indeed, the OEPA was not conceived to be an NGDO, but rather a timely mechanism to establish and maintain the regional elimination program, a secretariat for the multinational/ multiagency coalition, and a technical and financial support resource to the national elimination programs. The River Blindness Foundation agreed to serve as the OEPA's "parent" NGDO organization in an administrative capacity (i.e., to make contracts, establish accounts, and apply for grant monies), and to employ

TABLE 1. Key meetings and workshops of the Regional Initiative to Eli

and supervise

workers carried out a joint epidemiological exercise on the shared border of their countries, Guatemala and Mexico have reached several agreements in which onchocerciasis has been specifically mentioned, and Brazil and Venezuela have an inter-institutional plan of action related to ivermectin distribution activities in the migratory populations who cross their shared borders.

## CHALLENGES FOR THE FUTURE

A movement to eliminate morbidity from onchocerciasis in the Americas was stimulated by the donation of ivermectin, designed in a multinational plan of action, sanctioned by Resolution XIV of the Directing Council of PAHO, and launched by the River Blindness Foundation in a gamble of a \$1 million seed grant. The OEPA maintains the initiative by serving the multiagency coalition as a means for expeditious, task-oriented

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