Call for proposals:

Ophthalmology research in low- and middle-income countries 2022
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The call for proposals at a glance:

**Thematic focus:**
– Interdisciplinary biomedical research projects in ophthalmology aiming to develop and assess new diagnostic, prevention, or treatment methods for eye diseases adapted to the local context and environment of low- and middle-income countries (LMICs).
– Institutional research capacity building projects: projects aiming at sustainably building, developing, or reinforcing institutional structures enabling biomedical ophthalmology research.
– Projects combining both aspects are welcome.

**Duration of the projects:** 1 to 4 years.

**Scale of funding:** from CHF 50’000 to CHF 100’000 per year, for one to four years, with at least 50% of the funding to be used in LMICs.

**Partnerships:**
invited to apply are consortia of research groups with at least one partner based in a LMIC. The involvement of a Swiss partner in the consortium is welcome. A partner in a high-income country is however not mandatory. Most of the research should take place in one or several LMICs. To enhance knowledge transfer at least one PI or co-PI has to be an established (R3) or leading researcher (R4) in ophthalmology according to the European Framework for research careers.

**Deadline:** May 31, 2022

**Final decision:** November 2022
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A. Why is Velux Stiftung engaged in this direction?

1) The foundation funding policy: the path to impact

The foundation aims to contribute to sustainable change and impact for the benefit of humanity. While there are many important and unsolved topics in the supported funding areas, Velux Stiftung focuses on those ideas or challenges which are relevant but have received too little attention from major funding sources, and/or take an interdisciplinary, outside-of-the-box approach and lack alternative funding opportunities.

As knowledge entrepreneurs our grantees have a clear vision of the impact their research could generate and how they can foster the necessary change. Velux Stiftung aims to support researchers who have the path to impact in mind and want to actively transfer their science-based knowledge beyond the academic community into action and impact. This ultimate objective determines which audiences need to be targeted, and in which form the results should be transferred.

We focus on projects which transfer their discoveries to initiate change and create impact.

Velux Stiftung is a Swiss foundation based in Zurich with a long tradition of supporting ophthalmology research in Switzerland and globally.

To learn more about Velux Stiftung: https://veluxstiftung.ch
2) The path to impact applied to ophthalmology research

Global estimates of visual impairments point to a major challenge globally with almost 600 million people suffering from blindness or visual impairments. Although the large majority of affected people live in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), only a limited research effort is focused on their specific challenges.

To increase the impact of the foundation’s funding in ophthalmology focusing on biomedical research, the board decided in June 2020 to extend its scope and engage in this neglected topic from the perspective of the LMICs for 5 years.

B. Vision, goals and approach of the program

1) Vision:
Contribute to reducing visual impairments and blindness in LMICs by

• inducing a change of perspective in ophthalmology research, focusing on identifying and working on the specific biomedical knowledge gaps in LMICs in relation to the local context and environment.

• supporting biomedical research which addresses knowledge gaps in ophthalmology research regarding the prevention, diagnosis and management of eye conditions in LMICs (see D.1).

• developing and establishing research capacity in LMICs enabling independent research locally in a sustainable manner.
2) **Goals:**

- The knowledge produced is of direct relevance for LMICs.
- The new knowledge can be applied by the scientific community or other stakeholders for the benefit of patients and populations in LMICs in the medium to longer term.
- The project fosters local ophthalmology research centres in LMICs through partnerships, capacity building and scientific network development.

3) **Approach:**

The Velux Stiftung wishes to achieve these goals by

- Funding outside-the-box *interdisciplinary research in ophthalmology* carried out in partnerships including at least a research group based in a LMIC where researchers join forces and maximize outreach, knowledge and skills transfer (all details are available in section D.1).

- Supporting *institutional research capacity building and establishing sustainable ophthalmology research centres* in LMICs to perform locally relevant research (all details are available in section D.2).

A yearly budget of CHF 2 million will be dedicated to the program. One call for proposal will be published every year from 2021 to 2025.
C. General requirements for applications

Each requirement mentioned below should be addressed in the application. All of these points will be taken into account for the evaluation and the decision-making process.

1) Eligibility:
   The general eligibility and exclusion criteria for funding by Velux Stiftung apply. Please refer to the corresponding sections on our website.
   To be eligible, the applicants should also demonstrate that the necessary due diligence is in place to ensure that the project can take place as described in the application.

   In addition to these general criteria, it is mandatory that:
   - Applications contain sufficient elements of research capacity building in LMICs (see section D.1 b.).
   - Applications convincingly highlight the relevance for and integration in the local context.
   - An institution can only submit a maximum of two applications per call as institution of the PI or co-PI, otherwise all applications will be excluded.

2) Geographical requirements:
   a. Our reference for identifying if a country belongs to the category of LMICs is the Development Assistance Committee List of Official Development Assistance recipients from the OECD.
   b. Political stability is taken into account.

3) Collaboration requirements
   a. Invited to apply are consortia of research groups with at least one partner based in a LMIC. For reasons related to the statutes of the foundation, the involvement of a Swiss partner in the consortium is welcome. A partner in a high-income country is however not mandatory.
   b. In order to maximize outreach as well as knowledge and skills transfer, at least one PI or co-PI of the consortium has to be an established (R3) or a leading researcher (R4) in ophthalmology according to the European Framework for research careers. Further information about the framework can be found here.
   c. The project should mainly take place in one or several LMICs.
   d. In case the PI is based in a high-income country, there must be a clearly delineated partnership with, and scientific leadership from the co-PI(s) based in the LMICs where the project will take place.

   In the preparation of your proposal, please follow the guidelines for fair research partnerships of the Swiss National Foundation.
   The fairness of the partnership is a criterion in the evaluation process. The reference for the evaluation is the Research Fairness Initiative (RFI) and the topics of the RFI report. Please note that applications involving only one research group will not be considered.
4) **Contextual solutions required:**

The relevance to the LMIC context of the project and project results should be convincingly explained in all suitable parts of the application. Applicants must ensure that the envisioned innovations/treatment will be affordable, accessible and equitable for the target populations.

The context is defined as follows:

a. From the patient side: Nutrition, daily living habits, environmental conditions (light exposure, latitude, pollution, hygiene ...), working environment, financial resources, cultural factors, genetic risk factors that would increase the relevance and acceptance of the solution should be considered.

b. From the eye care provider side: the proposed solution has a realistic chance of being implemented in the existing health care systems, e.g., suitably trained eye care personal and infrastructure are available. If not, convincing arguments should be put forward justifying the eye care system development in the future.

c. From the infrastructure side: local availability of electricity, transportation possibilities, internet coverage should be considered for the proposed solution or the infrastructure will be strengthened during the project.

d. From the research side: capacities to undertake the proposed research or project are already in place in the LMIC setting (e.g., facilities, personnel and their skills, research governance), or these capacities will be built during the project.

5) **Use of the funding**

- At least 50% of the budget is used for the LMIC partner institution(s).

- General budget range: from CHF 50'000 to CHF 100'000 per year for one to four years. These budget categories can be requested:
  - Salaries (including university fees for students based in LMICs)
  - Consumables
  - Equipment
  - Knowledge transfer (Travels, conference participation, workshop organisation, ...)
  - Other costs (including budget posts for research capacity building that do not fit in the previous categories)

Note that the foundation generally does not support overhead costs and that an explanation for each budget category needs to be provided.
D. Possible types of applications

1) Interdisciplinary biomedical research projects in ophthalmology:

a. Thematic focus
   I. Addressing biomedical knowledge gaps in ophthalmology research specific to the situation and context of LMICs.
   II. Developing and assessing new diagnostic or prevention methods for eye diseases adapted to the local LMIC context and environment.
   III. Developing and assessing new biomedical treatment methods for eye diseases adapted to the local LMIC context and environment.

   Biomedical, basic, clinical, clinical epidemiology, technology development studies addressing stringently the context, environment, and specificities of LMICs will be considered. Collaborations with social scientists are welcome.

   Please find here the list of approved projects in 2021 from the first year of the ophthalmology program.

b. Key success factors:
   I. Research addressing neglected biomedical issues in relation with the local context and environment whose results have a high potential to improve the situation in LMICs.

   And

   II. Building capacity for biomedical research at the level of individuals via the training of researchers, students and teams. Please note that sufficient elements of research capacity building are mandatory for the application to be eligible (such as training local teams in data collection and data entry, in data analysis and/or interpretation, in writing for publication or in presenting research findings in meetings/conferences).

c. Topics excluded from the call
   Proposals where the main focus lies in the following topics are excluded from the call and will not be considered:
   I. Health systems/services research.
   II. Implementation research/intervention science.
   III. Health economics.
   IV. Community development.
   V Policy/advocacy.
   VI. Training/education/capacity building for eye care or research to improve this process.
2) Institutional research capacity building projects for ophthalmology research in LMICs.

a. Thematic focus

In addition to research projects (see D.1), the call is also open to projects that focus on developing sustainable institutional research capacity in LMICs. These projects can come in combination with a research question and research plan or only focus on the institutional capacity building. A follow-up application for successful proposals will be possible.

We understand research capacity building as sustainably developing people and institutions, fostering collaborations across disciplines and sectors, building soft and hard supporting infrastructure, and a strong enabling environment including research coordination and management where research and research actors can thrive.

By sustainable institutional research capacity building in LMICs, we mean strengthening the capacity of research departments in universities and research institutions to fund, manage and sustain themselves and their own research through for instance research management, leadership, communications, or infrastructure of organisations, as well as by establishing collaboration networks. These research capacities must be established or strengthened in a sustainable manner to allow them to be perpetuated independently after the end of the project.

What would enable your institution(s) to increase the quality of ophthalmology research and its transfer? For instance, to increase scientific quality, scientific outputs, to attract and retain excellent researchers, to provide career perspective for young academics, to attract and increase funding volume, to increase the reputation of the institution(s), to establish local expertise centres available for the research community (e.g. by setting up bio-statistics capability, tools for data entry/management, genomic or microscopy facilities, …) or to develop excellence centres in biomedical ophthalmology research.

To state only one concrete example, funding for staff to organise or coordinate research can be applied for (e.g. for coordinating research training, legal affairs, fund raising, for research management or research cooperation management).

Define the change aimed for and provide in your application a development plan describing how the new structure will sustainably bring ophthalmology research to the next level also after the end of the project.

To ensure sustainability of the effort of this type of projects beyond the duration of the support, preference will be given to projects that are co-financed by matching funds from local institutions.

For these applications, we strongly encourage to work in partnership with an existing national or international ophthalmology research centre. The core of the collaboration should then consist of activities necessary for knowledge and technology transfer in research and research management to the prospective centre of excellence.

Projects combining research and institutional research capacity building are welcome.

b. Topics excluded from the call:

What we do not fund under institutional capacity building for research:
   I. Funding for a fellowship program.
   II. Structures that will only be available during the project duration.
   III. Capacity building for eye care (e.g. improved training for eye care staff).

If you are unsure about the fit of your application to the scope of the call, please send an abstract to info@veluxstiftung.ch.
E. Application process

1) Call for proposals

A call for proposals will be open every year from 2021 to 2025 with a deadline in spring (for the exact date and further details about the application process please refer to our website). The final decision of the board is expected in November following the deadline. A yearly budget of CHF 2 million will be dedicated to the program. The application process takes place on our online portal.

2) Selection

a. Selection process

- Formal screening by the foundation management
  Project applications are screened for compliance with the exclusion criteria, and requirements of the call. Applications that do not fulfil these criteria will not be considered.

- Preselection by an international and interdisciplinary scientific committee. The scientific committee is currently composed of 9 experts originating from Switzerland, UK, Argentina, Rwanda, and India. Their expertise covers a variety of perspectives including basic and applied ophthalmology research, as well as transfer and implementation in LMICs. The scientific committee (SC) preselects the applications that are promising based on the impact potential and innovation of the approach (see point E.2)b.).

- Review/prioritisation by the SC
  – All preselected applications are peer-reviewed by one or two members of the SC based on the funding criteria (see point E.2)b.).
  – In a meeting, the committee discusses their evaluations and establish a shortlist of applications that is presented to the board of the foundation for final selection.

- The board of Velux Stiftung takes the final funding decision among the shortlisted applications.
b. Selection criteria

Please establish, for all suitable criteria, the relevance and integration of the project and project’s results in the local context.

- Impact (assuming the scientific goals of the project are achieved)
  - Relevance
  - Potential for change
  - Transfer potential

- Scientific quality
  - Originality and novelty
  - Outside-the-box thinking.
  - Interdisciplinarity.

- Resources
  - (Scientific) competence of the applicants
  - Leadership competence
  - Environment
  - Collaboration
  - Budget

- Research capacity building in LMICs
  Individual research capacity building will be evaluated based on these criteria:
  - The training/mentoring will benefit individuals in LMICs.
  - The intensity of the training/mentoring. For instance, a whole PhD project vs. episodic training.
  - The professional opportunities available after the training/mentoring.
  - The training/mentoring is adequately structured and planned, as well as described in detail in the application (including budget).

  The institutional research capacity building will be evaluated based on these criteria:
  - The project addresses a gap identified by the LMIC institution.
  - The potential to bring a positive change in the LMIC partner institution(s) and more broadly to the local research ecosystem.
  - The potential to foster a conducive environment for research. More precisely, the potential to increase scientific quality, output and/or attract and retain established researcher, improve career perspective of PhDs/Postdocs, increase funding volume, increase the reputation of LMICs’ institution(s), develop research networks and facilitate collaborations, develop a local center of expertise or centre of excellence...
  - The potential of the change to be sustainable after the end of the funding.
  - The quality of the partnership between institutions.
  - The feasibility of the approach.
  - The commitment of the institution(s) (e.g. by proposing co-funding).

Please provide your plan for capacity building with the details of the activities in your application and include the required funding in your budget.

See the funding criteria on our website for more information.
F. Grant and agreement terms and conditions

The general terms of the foundation apply. Please refer to our website for more information.