

Press release

## SolidarMed-led consortium obtains SDC grant to fight non-communicable disease epidemic in sub-Saharan Africa

Lucerne, 8 January 2021

**Non-Communicable Diseases (NCDs) such as diabetes, high blood pressure and impaired mental health are the number one cause of death and disability globally. More than 75% of all premature NCD deaths occur in low- and middle-income countries. A consortium of implementation partners and researchers led by the Swiss NGO SolidarMed proposes a multi-disciplinary research for development program fighting this disproportionate health and socio-economic burden. The Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) will fund the program with 6 Mio CHF over the next five years.**

Lesotho, similar to other sub-Saharan countries, faces a situation where the health burden of NCDs now overtakes HIV and other infectious diseases. The country has successfully managed to reduce HIV transmission and AIDS-related deaths due to a decentralized HIV testing and care strategy. A key attribute of this strategy is the involvement of community health workers (CHW) to guarantee access of testing and treatment to the rural population. The awarded program aims at applying similar approaches in the fight against NCDs.

The program called ComBaCaL (Community Based chronic disease Care Lesotho) has been jointly developed by a consortium led by the Swiss NGO SolidarMed together with the Swiss Tropical and Public Health Institute (Swiss TPH), the National University of Lesotho, the Lesotho Ministry of Health, and an affected community member. Further collaborators include the University of Zurich (Department of Informatics) and an eHealth start-up from Lesotho.

### ***Combining NCD care with eHealth and research***

Both, HIV and NCDs are chronic diseases and require life-long treatment. ComBaCaL will build upon the lessons learnt from the decentralized HIV program. The program aims at improving NCD care at 23 health facilities through structured staff trainings and supervision, as well as at community level through CHW who will be trained and empowered to deliver NCD prevention, screening, diagnosis - and even care. A locally developed eHealth application will support the trainings, supervision and care provision at community and facility level and efficiently link the data.

“In the spirit of SDG 17 we aim to tackle the growing NCD pandemic through a multi-disciplinary South-North research for implementation partnership,” states Niklaus Labhardt, Research Group Leader at Swiss TPH and president of SolidarMed. His team of researchers, together with the local SolidarMed Lesotho team, has successfully validated and implemented several innovative community-based HIV test-and-treat models in the county over the last 5 years (more information [here](#)). In a large-scale cluster randomized trial, they will evaluate the effectiveness of eHealth supported community-based care within ComBaCaL. “This trial allows to assess if eHealth supported CHW could be a feasible, safe and effective approach to increase access to NCD care for communities living in remote areas,” says Alain Amstutz, physician, and member of the ComBaCaL-steering committee.

***Improving not only health, but also social and economic well-being of communities***

Poverty and social factors are closely linked to NCDs. The rise of these chronic diseases in turn impede poverty reduction in low- and middle-income countries. By offering innovative and high-quality NCD care close to people’s home, ComBaCaL will directly address this problem. Moreover, ComBaCaL aims to bring more holistic and structural change to the communities involved: The CHWs, mostly women, will be employed by a social enterprise, where they acquire entrepreneurial skills enabling them to set up small enterprises (e.g., for trading goods) to earn a living. Thus, this initiative is driven by a health equity spirit, will strengthen rural communities, and create self-sustainable jobs. “I believe that ComBaCaL will have a transformative impact on NCD care in low- and middle-income countries in an innovative self-sustainable way,” expects Ilse van Roy, Head of International Programs at SolidarMed.

***Impact beyond Lesotho***

The five-year-long program will start in two rural districts in Lesotho and focus first on high blood pressure and diabetes. Later it will be scaled-up beyond the initial program area and widen its scope to include mental health disorders. More than 200’000 people are expected to directly benefit from improved NCD screening, diagnosis, prevention, and care. At least 100 CHWs will be hired by the social enterprise to deliver the program and in parallel have the possibility to become self-sustainable. Six junior researchers from Africa (50% female) will enroll in a Master or PhD program and more than 60 health care professionals will benefit from capacity building. ComBaCaL will generate high-level evidence through its integrated research to influence national and international NCD guidelines and policies.

**ComBaCaL in a nutshell:**

**Problems addressed:**

- Rising burden of NCDs, increasing mortality and morbidity and low awareness of NCD
- Shortage of clinical staff and poor infrastructure leads to suboptimal NCD diagnosis and care in rural areas of sub-Saharan Africa
- Lack of evidence supporting task-shifted community-based NCDs care through community health workers
- Donor-dependent care models that do not address structural socio-economic change in the communities

**Main activities:**

- Development and implementation of an eHealth NCD training and care application for health facility staff and CHW
- Recruitment and training of CHWs for NCD community-care: screening, diagnosis, and treatment
- Introduction of a social enterprise for CHW: selling skills and business training with a start-up fund to set-up small businesses for self-sustainability
- Evaluation of the NCD community care model: multi-phase adaptive pragmatic cluster-randomized trial assessing effectiveness, cost-effectiveness, acceptability, and safety
- Capacity building for junior scientists from the global South (at least six Masters or PhDs)

**Overall goal:**

Development of an innovative, evidence-based, sustainable, and scalable model of care to improve the health, social and economic well-being of people affected by NCDs in resource-limited settings.

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**Pictures**

<https://media.solidarmed.ch/?c=629&k=0604cf5abd> (please respect copyright)

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**SolidarMed – Partnerships for health**

SolidarMed improves healthcare for more than 2.5 million people in Kenya, Lesotho, Mozambique, Tanzania, Zambia, Zimbabwe, South Africa, and India. The Swiss non-profit organization, based in Lucerne, specifically strengthens existing health facilities, and trains and develops local health care workers. The projects are developed in close co-operation with local hospitals, health centres and authorities, accompanied by local health professionals. SolidarMed, as a Swiss non-profit organization with Zewo certification, works efficiently, conscientiously, and transparently. SolidarMed continuously reviews all projects for their effectiveness and improves them accordingly.

[www.solidarmed.ch](http://www.solidarmed.ch)

**Swiss TPH – Excellence in Global Health**

The Swiss Tropical and Public Health Institute (Swiss TPH) is a world-leading institute in global health with a particular focus on low- and middle-income countries. Associated with the University of Basel, Swiss TPH combines research, education and services at local, national and international levels. Over 800 people from 80 nations work at Swiss TPH focusing on infectious and non-communicable diseases, environment, society and health as well as health systems and interventions.

[www.swisstph.ch](http://www.swisstph.ch)

**Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation SDC**

The SDC is the agency for international cooperation of the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA). It is responsible for the overall coordination with other federal authorities of development and cooperation with Eastern Europe as well as for humanitarian aid delivered by the Swiss Confederation. Swiss international cooperation, which is an integral part of the Federal Council's foreign policy, aims to contribute to a world without poverty and in peace, for sustainable development. It fosters economic self-reliance and state autonomy, contributes to the improvement of production conditions, helps address environmental problems, and ensures better access to education and basic healthcare services.

[www.sdc.admin.ch](http://www.sdc.admin.ch)

**TRANSFORM Call from SDC**

The overarching goal is to promote applied, need-based scientific research conducted by consortia of researchers and implementation partners, who together analyse, develop, and test innovative solutions to sustainable development challenges in least developed, low and middle-income countries in the Global South and East. SDC received 91 short pre-proposals, selected nine to submit a full proposal, and decided to support three large programmes starting at the end of 2020/early 2021, in health, agriculture and water & sanitation. A fourth proposal is under consideration.