

ITM and Congolese partners join forces to prevent and combat emerging disease outbreaks

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The Institute of Tropical Medicine (ITM) in Antwerp is launching CREDO, a large-scale project to better prepare Congolese scientists to research and respond to new and re-emerging epidemics. Through COVID-19, we have experienced ourselves how fragile we are in the face of emerging diseases. With this project, ITM wants to collaborate in order to conduct science and learn lessons from each other on COVID-19, while at the same time strengthening its partners' capacity to fight epidemics.

CREDO is the extension of an agreement between ITM and the Directorate-General for Development Cooperation and Humanitarian Aid (DGD). The aim of the project is to improve the health of the Congolese population through building capacity for research in emerging and re-emerging diseases. In concrete terms, this means investing in local researchers and institutes, in order to prepare them as well as possible against (re)emerging diseases.

"The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) was affected by COVID-19, as many countries globally, but it also has experienced several outbreaks of Ebola in the last 2-3 years. The health system in the country is not nearly as strong as ours, which poses potentially great danger to the population", says ITM Director Marc-Alain Widdowson. "Conversely, they have much more experience of major disease outbreaks. Think Ebola, cholera or measles. As early as the 1970s, whole villages went into quarantine after an outbreak. Even the elbow-bump greeting that we now suddenly find normal is not a new invention. People in Congo did this long before we had ever heard of COVID-19."

CREDO aims to better understand how emerging diseases are transmitted, what impact they have on the health of the individual and the population as well as evaluation of diagnosis and prevention. As a result, DRC can decide what are the best control and preventive measures, how can hospitals be better prepared and health care be organised differently in the future. Moreover, some of the planned research will increase global knowledge and be relevant for countries throughout Africa and the world. Four million euros are earmarked for this project.

Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Development Cooperation Alexander De Croo: "The philosophy of ITM fits in nicely with Belgian's development policy. It is not up to us to explain to the people in the DRC how things should be done. This is a project where reciprocity is central and where we both benefit. By sharing our scientific experience, but also by learning from our local partners. This way, we both will be better able to contain future epidemics. Not only in Congo, but also in Belgium".

For decades, ITM researchers have been partnering to fight epidemics in the south, including in the DRC. In the 1970s, the renowned Congolese virologist, Jean-Jacques Muyembe and then-ITM scientist Peter Piot co-discovered Ebola. Professor Muyembe is also closely involved in this project. Currently, ITM is also working with the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to eliminate sleeping sickness. The CREDO project is a new step in reducing the impact of emerging disease on the Congolese population and helping reduce transmission worldwide.