

Minister Meryame Kitir gets to know the Institute of Tropical Medicine

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24-02-21



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Minister of Development Cooperation and Urban Policy, Meryame Kitir, paid a visit to the Institute of Tropical Medicine (ITM) in Antwerp yesterday. This was to get acquainted with the Institute's working. During the visit, Minister Kitir was provided with an overview of the research and development cooperation activities carried out by ITM, with an emphasis on innovative research with a broader social impact.

For many years, ITM has worked closely with institutional partners in Latin America, Africa, and Asia on research projects that are financed by the Directorate-general Development Cooperation and Humanitarian Aid (DGD). ITM, and its cooperation with partners in the South, primarily focuses on capacity building. "During the current Covid-19 pandemic, the power of our partner network has been extremely valuable. We are in close contact with one another and exchange experiences and expertise about how we can tackle the situation in each other's countries. The public health system that our partners have may be less robust but, on the other hand, they have much more experience with major disease outbreaks. This type of challenge is nothing new, all the measures were applied during the Ebola crisis in DRC," explains Marc-Alain Widdowson, director of ITM.

After a warm welcome, there was a detailed meeting between Minister Kitir and Widdowson. Among other things, they talked about ITM's scientific projects, the policy objectives of Minister Kitir for the coming four years, and the Institute's future challenges.

During a tour around the ITM's buildings, the Minister was offered an insight into sleeping sickness. Three years ago, DGD, the Congolese government and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation gave a green light to ITM and its Congolese partners to eliminate sleeping sickness by 2030. ITM and its local partners combined their expertise and are working along with scientific organisations and implementing bodies. During her visit, Minister Kitir saw a tsetse fly, which carries sleeping sickness, and took part in a scientific show & tell about the diagnostics used to detect the disease. ITM produces and distributes over two million tests annually to detect sleeping sickness.

"As a result of the global fight against Covid-19, we risk losing our focus on other diseases. This could include sleeping sickness, which occurs in various regions in Africa and which is usually fatal. ITM plays an important role in the fight against the disease and has achieved great results. The cost of this is an investment I'm happy to make. It saves lives in the short term and contributes to a more robust healthcare system that can stand on its own two feet," explains Minister Kitir.

During the tour, Minister Kitir was introduced to several international students at ITM. These students are completing specialised courses at ITM in infectious diseases and public health, or they are conducting scientific research via a doctorate. The training fees are financed by DGD. The students talked about their background, their motivation for studying and what it's like to study and live in Antwerp during the corona crisis. ITM trains over 500 international master's and PhD students each year, with the aim of strengthening capacity building in their country of origin.

Finally, Minister Kitir also talked to ITM scientists about maternal and child care, strengthening health systems and quality of medicines.