

Call for Proposals:

Ophthalmology Research in Low- and Middle-Income Countries 2024



The call for proposals at a glance:

Thematic focus:

- **Institutional research capacity strengthening projects:** projects aiming at sustainably building, developing, or reinforcing institutional structures enabling biomedical/clinical ophthalmology research in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs).
- **Interdisciplinary biomedical research projects** in ophthalmology aiming to develop and validate new diagnostic, prevention, or treatment methods for eye diseases adapted to the local context and environment of LMICs. **Such projects must also contribute to some extent to strengthen research capacities of the institutions in LMICs.**

Note that projects with a higher share of institutional research capacity strengthening aspects will be prioritized in the project assessments.

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:

Consortia of research groups with at least one partner based in a LMIC are invited to apply. 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](#).

To enhance the sustainability of the institutional research capacity strengthening, a member of the LMIC research institution's executive / leadership team (member of senior management and decision-making body) should be included in the project team as PI or co-PIs.

Deadline: 30 April 2024

Final decision: November 2024

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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 over 1 billion people suffering from blindness or mild, moderate to severe 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 the specific challenges in these regions of the world.

The board therefore decided in June 2020 to extend the scope of the ophthalmology funding area and engage in this neglected topic from the perspective of the LMICs until at least 2025.

B. **Vision, goals and approach of the program**

1) **Vision:**

Contribute to reducing visual impairments and blindness in LMICs by

- Developing and strengthening research capacity in LMICs, with a focus on research institutions, reinforcing independent ophthalmology research locally in a sustainable manner. Research institutions in LMICs establish scientific reputation. Our vision is that following the development of research capacities, this will in turn indirectly contribute to attract and foster clinical expertise as well as contribute to improve health provision.
- Inducing a change of perspective in ophthalmology research by focusing on identifying and working on the specific biomedical knowledge gaps in LMICs in relation to the local context and environment.

2) **Goals:**

- The projects foster and contribute to the development of local ophthalmology research institutions in LMICs through partnerships, scientific network development and research capacity strengthening ([see table C.1](#) b. for further details).
- The projects contribute to develop the scientific expertise and reputation of the involved institutions.
- 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.

3) **Approach:**

The Velux Stiftung wishes to achieve these goals by

- Supporting **institutional research capacity strengthening and establishing sustainable ophthalmology research centres in LMICs** to perform locally relevant research.
- Funding outside-the-box **interdisciplinary research in ophthalmology** targeting LMIC relevant challenges.

An annual budget of CHF 2 million will be dedicated to the program. One call for proposals is published every year from 2021 to 2025.

C. Thematic requirements for applications

Such projects are eligible:

- 1) Institutional research capacity strengthening projects for ophthalmology research in LMICs.
- 2) Interdisciplinary research projects in ophthalmology also contributing to strengthen research capacities of institutions in LMICs.

Please note that **the extent of the contribution to research capacity strengthening for institutions will influence the prioritization in the project assessment.**

Please find here the list of [approved projects](#) in the first three years of the program.

If you are unsure about the fit of your application to the scope of the call, please send an abstract to info@veluxstiftung.ch including the reasons why you think your project fits the call.

1) Institutional research capacity strengthening projects for ophthalmology research in LMICs.

a. Thematic focus

The call is 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 ([see C.2](#) for further details) or only focus on the institutional capacity strengthening. A follow-up application for successful proposals will be possible.

By sustainable institutional research capacity strengthening in LMICs, Velux Stiftung means strengthening the capacity of research departments in universities and research institutions to fund, manage and sustain themselves and their own research. 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.

- b. Overall goals of the research capacity strengthening for institutions in LMICs. All the goals listed in the following table (non-exhaustive list) are in the context of ophthalmology biomedical research. Projects do not need to address all aspects to be successful. Your goals should be suitable to the current “maturity” of your institution allowing it to move to the next stage.

Goals	Potential implementation
Increase scientific quality, scientific outputs at the level of the institution	Development of research management (financial and scientific coordination of the research), quality management, legal affairs, research training coordination.
Attract research funding and increase funding volume	Development of research fund-raising capacities
Attract and retain excellent researchers / Provide research perspectives for young academics	Thanks to e.g., the reputation of the institution, a stimulating research environment, opportunities for students and early-career researchers to continue their career in research...
Increase leadership of institutions	Leadership training for key staff in research or institutional development
Increase the dissemination and transfer of the research outputs	Development of a communication office, development of a technology transfer office, development of networks between research and other stakeholders (industry, policy, patients ...)
Establish local expertise centres	Setting up bio-statistics capability, tools for data management and analysis, genomic or microscopy facilities, establishing new research laboratories...
Develop research networks and facilitate collaborations	Establish or strengthen research networks of institutions
Develop centres of excellence	Internationally recognised entity that: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Performs research, provides leadership, best practice, research support on a focus area. – Recognises and addresses local challenges via research. – Transfers and disseminates the results to relevant stakeholders. – Trains the new generations of researchers.

Define the change aimed for and provide in your application a development plan describing concretely what is planned, when, how, and the expected outputs. Please also mention how the new structure will sustainably bring ophthalmology research to the next level also after the end of the project.

- c. Key success factors
- Relevance and potential for change.
 - **Sustainability:** The quality of the longer-term plan after the initial support. Preference will be given to projects that are co-financed by matching funds from local institutions.
 - **Involvement of the institution's leadership/executive:** We are convinced that commitment by / involvement of and dialogue with the institution's leadership / executive (member of senior management and decision-making body) is important to align the initiative with the institution overall strategy. The project lead (PI or co-PI) should include researcher(s) and member(s) of the LMIC institution's leadership.
 - **Mutual learning:** The collaboration is set up so that a mutual learning is enabled with the different partners gaining research capacities in the collaboration.
 - We strongly encourage working in partnership with an existing national or international ophthalmology research centre.
- d. Topics excluded from the call:
- Under institutional capacity building for research, we do not fund:
- Research fellowships not linked to a concrete research plan.
 - Structures that will only be available during the project duration.
 - Capacity building for eye care (e.g. training for eye care staff in care delivery).

2) Interdisciplinary biomedical research projects in ophthalmology:

- a. Thematic focus
- Research projects addressing biomedical knowledge gaps in ophthalmology research specific to the situation and context of LMICs by developing or validating new preventive, diagnostic, or treatment methods for eye diseases adapted to the local LMIC context and environment.
- Biomedical, basic, clinical, clinical epidemiology and technology development studies which strictly address the context, environment, and specificities of LMICs will be considered ([see D.4](#)) for further details on this point). Collaborations with social scientists are welcome.
- Such projects must also contribute to strengthening research capacities of the institutions in LMICs ([see C.1](#)) for more details).**
- The development of research capacities for individuals via the training of researchers, students and teams is welcome if it contributes to achieve the project's scientific goals.
- b. Key success factors:
- Research addressing **neglected issues** in relation with the local context and environment whose results have a high potential to improve the situation in LMICs in mid- to long-term.
- And**
- Developing **capacity for research in the institutions in LMICs ([see C.1](#))**. **Sufficient elements of institutional research capacity strengthening are mandatory** for the application to be eligible.
- Please note that the extend of the contribution to research capacity strengthening for institutions will influence the prioritization in the project assessment.

- 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:
- Health systems / services research.
 - Implementation research / intervention science.
 - Health economics.
 - Community development.
 - Policy / advocacy.
 - Training / education / capacity building for eye care or research to improve the above.

D. General requirements for applications

Each requirement mentioned below should be addressed in the application. All of these points will be considered in the evaluation and 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 particular, every institution applying for funding must have all legal rights to receive international funding and should provide a justification (e.g. Indian institutions must submit a copy of their current FCRA approval).
- All involved institutions must act not-for-profit.

In addition to these general criteria, it is mandatory that:

- **Applications contain sufficient elements aiming to strengthen research capacity of institutions in LMICs** ([see section C.1 b.](#)).
- **Applications convincingly highlight the relevance for and integration into 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:

- 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.
- Political stability is taken into account.
- As an organization based in Switzerland, Velux Stiftung has to comply with the Swiss State Secretariat for Economic Affairs [SECO's sanctions list](#). We also consider international recommendations to counter laundering ([e.g. the FATF recommendations](#)).

3) Collaboration requirements

- Consortia of research groups with at least one partner based in a LMIC are invited to apply. 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.
- 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](#).
- To enhance the sustainability of the institutional research capacity strengthening, at least a member of the LMIC research institution's executive / leadership team (member of senior management and decision-making body) should be included in the project team as PI or co-PIs.
- The project should mainly take place in one or several LMICs.
- 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 from the Swiss Academy of Sciences](#).

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 originating from only one research group will not be considered**. The applicant team must include at least one co-PI or one collaborator from another research group than the PI. This person must be actively involved in the proposed project.

4) Contextual solutions required:

Velux Stiftung is interested to support research capacity strengthening and research projects that will contribute, in the middle- or long-term, to an improvement of eye health of populations living in LMICs in an affordable and equitable manner. Although this may be difficult to demonstrate for 'basic' science, we encourage applicants to provide information on how their research findings will – in the short or long term – result in better eye health for all. We are looking for specific and realistic plans considering the local LMIC context, not just for aspirational statements: the clearer, the better.

The relevance to the LMIC context of the project and project results should be convincingly explained in all relevant sections of the application.

The **context** is defined as follows:

- From the patient side: Nutrition, daily living habits, environmental conditions (light exposure, latitude, pollution, hygiene ...), working environment, affordability, cultural factors, genetic risk factors that would increase the relevance and acceptance of the solution should be considered.
- From the eye care provider side: the proposed solution has a realistic chance of being implemented in the existing health care systems, e.g., affordability and 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.
- 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.
- 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 developed 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 (not more than 20 % of the total amount, exceptions must be duly justified)
 - 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)

An explanation for each budget category needs to be provided.

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 [web portal](#).

2) Selection

a. Selection process

Below are the main steps of the process for more details please refer to [our website](#).

- Formal screening by the foundation management.
- Preselection by an international and interdisciplinary scientific committee with representatives from various continents. Their expertise covers a variety of perspectives including basic and applied ophthalmology research, as well as transfer and implementation in LMICs.
- Review of preselected applications / prioritisation / shortlist by the scientific committee.
- The board of Velux Stiftung takes the final funding decision among the shortlisted applications.

b. Selection criteria

The following criteria are used to select application. **For all suitable criteria, establish 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
- Institutional research capacity building in LMICs
 - 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 help local research provide a conducive environment for research ([see C.1\)b.](#)).
 - 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 a co-funding, the leadership of the institution is involved from the start).

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

- Resources
 - (Scientific) competence of the applicants
 - Leadership competence
 - Environment
 - Collaboration
 - Budget
- Scientific quality (for research projects)
 - Originality and novelty
 - Outside-the-box thinking
 - Interdisciplinarity

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.