

24 Nov 2020 | News

Viewpoint: COVID-19 underlines the need for an ambitious new EU research partnership with Africa

Joint EU/Africa research and innovation partnerships on infectious diseases should be a priority for Horizon Europe, says Maria da Graça Carvalho, MEP

By [Maria Da Graça Carvalho](#)



Maria Graça Carvalho, Member of the EU Parliament. Photo: European Parliament.

Europe's leading position in biomedical research has proved to be critical in the response to the COVID-19 pandemic, providing a dramatic illustration of the extent to which research holds the key to overcoming the current crisis and in enabling the transformations we want to see happen in Europe and in the world over the next decades.

As the world's biggest science programme, Horizon Europe – currently under negotiation – will provide the main means to address these challenges. Within the framework R&D programme, some R&I partnerships will play a crucial role in health.

For evidence of the power of these partnerships to advance healthcare, you should look to the highly successful European and Developing Countries Clinical Trials Partnership (EDCTP), in which the EU and a number of European and sub-Saharan African countries have invested in capacity building, to address unmet need in poverty-related infectious diseases.

This field of research is direly underfunded and mostly dependent on public R&I funding. One significant advance for which EDCTP was responsible is the development of new child-friendly formulations of antiviral

HIV drugs, which have increased children's access to treatment. In another example - for the first time in over forty years - a phase III clinical trial of a new tuberculosis treatment was implemented.

These are but a couple examples of how the partnership has made progress towards meeting global targets to end epidemics of diseases of poverty.

As minister for Science, Research and Higher Education in Portugal, in 2003, I had the honour of being directly involved in the launch of EDCTP1. That initial partnership was actually proposed by me, with the support of Mozambique. Later, as an MEP, I was shadow rapporteur of EDCTP2. Witnessing the many positive impacts of this partnership has been particularly rewarding for me.

The work supported by EDCTP has contributed to a faster response to the COVID-19 pandemic, with the partnership being one of the first EU instruments to be mobilised to launch R&I activities to halt the spread of the virus. Many of the innovations brought about through research on HIV/AIDS, malaria and tuberculosis in the past decade, have helped speed up development of tools against COVID-19.

Despite these advances, the COVID-19 pandemic threatens to reverse much of the progress made in the fight against poverty-related and neglected diseases that unfairly burden more than 2.8 billion people worldwide. Increased efforts are desperately needed to develop the tools to reduce avoidable deaths and suffering. There is, in fact, an unprecedented need for investment into all health research.

This is why MEPs are proud that we managed to negotiate increased funding for Horizon Europe with the EU Council. Unfortunately, the new budget of €84.9 billion still falls short of what the European Parliament asked for and what is required to address the urgent need for research funding, in particular in health.

It is yet to be decided which elements of Horizon Europe will benefit from the €4 billion that will be added to the Horizon budget. We hope health will be a priority. It would be tragic to have a smaller health budget in the next programme than the €7.4 billion available under Horizon 2020.

The successor programme to EDCTP, the EU-Africa Global Health Partnership, has a broader scope, which could potentially include diseases that do not suffer from market failure. If we want this new approach to be successful, we will need to make sure that there is a significant budget increase. Otherwise, the core target of this partnership – poverty related diseases – will not receive enough funds.

The European institutions must consider these issues when negotiating future R&I partnerships, and push for more ambition when it comes to the future EU-Africa Global Health Partnership. European participating states need to increase their contributions to the EDCTP successor programme.

Now, during a global pandemic, is not the time to deprioritise crucial partnerships that are developing the knowledge and tools we need to face current and future global health challenges.

Maria da Graça Carvalho is a Member of the European Parliament.