

Executive Summary

Background information

ESTHER Switzerland (ESTHER CH) is a network that engages Swiss hospitals and other health institutions in effective and sustainable North-South partnerships. Since 2011, Switzerland is a member of the ESTHER Alliance for Global Health Partnerships (EA), shares its vision and contributes to implementing the EA strategic framework 2015-2020. The ESTHER CH Secretariat was first hosted by the University Hospitals of Geneva (HUG) and then, in 2016, awarded to the Institute of Social and Preventive Medicine (ISPM) in Bern. The Programme's donor, the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), is also a member of the ESTHER CH Steering Committee. The current phase runs with an extension from February 2016 – October 2019 and with an overall budget of approx. 1,6 Million CHF. During this phase, a total of 12 grant and 7 start-up projects were funded in three rounds of calls. While the thematic focus was defined to be Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights including HIV/AIDS, there was no limitation as to the geographical scope. "Southern" partner institutions could come from any low- and middle-income country.

The external evaluation

An external evaluation was to undertake a comprehensive and external assessment of the ESTHER CH Programme (period under evaluation: beginning 2016 to end of 2018) and to guide the development of a possible next phase. The evaluation report, ending with a SWOT-analysis and main conclusions, covers the following key areas of findings:

1. Partnership building
2. Benefits, added value and outcomes
3. Positioning in the Swiss context
4. Sustainability and donor dependency
5. Programme management and governance
6. Toward a future ESTHER Switzerland approach

The evaluation was conducted between November 2018 and March 2019 by a team composed of Claudia Kessler (PHS Public Health Services) and Alexandra Nicola (IAMANEH Switzerland).

Summary of main findings, conclusions and recommendations

ESTHER CH has been well established as a programme to foster institutional North-South health partnerships (IHPs) along the principles of the ESTHER Alliance for Global Health Partnerships. Mechanisms, instruments and governance structures set up are well performing. The Programme was effective in supporting IHPs. Most of these partnerships pre-existed the ESTHER funded projects, but many could be further expanded (both in terms of involving additional partners or moving to new thematic fields of cooperation) and, following the EA charter, all were aligned with the ESTHER principles of partnerships and thus could further strengthen the quality of the partnership collaboration.

Main strengths and areas for improvement identified in this evaluation can be summarised as consisting of:

Strengths:

- Operational programme management and project support
- Governance structure
- Links between ESTHER CH and SDC
- North-South institutional health partnerships with great commitment
- Collaborative ties between ESTHER CH, SDC and the EA
- Organisation of exchange meetings, particularly the annual forum

Areas for improvement that should be addressed in future:

- Strategic outlook and directions
- Profiling, external communication and marketing
- Fundraising
- Reporting
- Visibility of the Programme in the Swiss health care system
- Visibility of the results of ESTHER CH

While ESTHER CH is as a programme still in its infancy, overall it has achieved the goals set for this phase. ESTHER CH succeeded in bringing different worlds closer together: that of research and health systems actors, that of Swiss actors in international cooperation and Swiss health care actors, and institutions from “the North and the South”. The Programme fills a gap in Switzerland and has a unique position which should be further sharpened and communicated externally in future. It has a high potential for involving additional Swiss health care actors in IHPs, including actors who have no prior experience or would not otherwise engage in international cooperation and actors who without ESTHER CH would not necessarily comply with collaboration principles, as defined by the EA. The Programme thus contributes to strengthening the “Swiss comparative advantage in health”.

Still much remains to do in coming years. Important issues that will have to be addressed include, amongst others, the questions on whether to place the focus rather on the project or on the partnership level and how far to go in terms of aiming for health systems strengthening.

Priorities for a next phase will have to include:

- Developing a strategy to clearly position ESTHER CH
- Adapting and further developing the approach based on the recommendations of this evaluation
- Strengthening external communication and marketing
- Strengthening fundraising to diversify funding sources and contribute to the sustainability of the Programme