



WESTERN-EASTERN EUROPEAN
PARTNERSHIP INITIATIVE
ON HIV, VIRAL HEPATITIS AND TB

WEEPI review and decision process

**Selection of funded projects
from the March 2020 call for proposals**

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Acknowledgements

The WEEPI Foundation gratefully acknowledges the expert contribution of the external reviewers who conducted the detailed reviews of the eligible proposals submitted in response to the first call for proposals (see Box 1 for names and affiliations).

WEEPI is also grateful for the valuable engagement of the WEEPI Advisory Board members who provide advice to the Executive Board on the development and execution of the WEEPI Foundation's programme of work, including on proposals recommended for funding (see Box 3 for names and affiliations).



1. Introduction

The Western-Eastern European Partnership Initiative on HIV, viral hepatitis and tuberculosis (WEEPI) Foundation was established by Prof. Manuel Battegay (University of Basel, Switzerland) and Prof. Jens Lundgren (University of Copenhagen and CHIP, Denmark) in October 2018, based on funding made available by a private philanthropist.

The WEEPI Foundation is registered in Switzerland and established according to Swiss legislation. The WEEPI Foundation Board consists of the two founders together with Lic. Jur. Andreas Dürr. The Executive Board, responsible for the of the overall strategic decisions, consists of the founders as well as Dr Andrew Amato (Stockholm, Sweden).

The first call for proposals was launched on 6 November 2019 at the 17th European AIDS Conference. The deadline for submissions was 1 March 2020.

More information is available on the WEEPI website at www.weeipi.org.

2. Submissions and review process

2.1. Submissions and pre-screening

Thirty-two proposals were submitted through the online platform at www.weeipi.org by the 1 March 2020 deadline. Following a pre-screening against the core eligibility criteria (Table 1), 31 proposals were deemed eligible and proceeded to a full review while one was submitted by a non-eligible country.

Table 1. Core eligibility criteria (first call for proposals)

Eligibility criteria	Description
Country	Ukraine, Georgia, Romania, Moldova, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.
Institution	Public health care institutions, universities, university-associated institutes, private and public hospitals, and non-governmental not for profit organizations.
Applicant	Must have a permanent employment at an eligible institution and be endorsed by the governing body of the applying institution.
Budget and duration	Up to CHF 30 000, 80% of budget spent in eligible countries, max duration 12 months.
WEEPI scope	Reduction of barriers to testing, prevention and treatment for HIV, viral hepatitis and TB, including stigmatization and focusing on key population groups. Improved quality of care and monitoring of care instruments (including eHealth solutions). Building partnership with other health institutions at national and/or international level. Capacity building at national level, including training activities.

2.2 Detailed reviews

Each proposal was reviewed independently by three reviewers with experience in research and knowledge of the eastern European region – two external and one internal WEEPI reviewer per proposal (see box 1 and 2). The reviews were based on a standardized online form consisting of 11 questions



focusing on project relevance, methodology, impact plausibility, organization and budget, each to be scored against a 5-point scale (i.e. max score of 55 points) and each with an option to provide a comment to justify the rating and suggest any changes.

The reviewers were allocated to review a set of proposals according to their expertise, e.g. at least 1 TB expert would review each TB focused proposal etc. and one (mainly) public health and one (mainly) clinical reviewer per proposal.

Due to the global outbreak with SARS-COV-2, the timeline for the external review process had to be extended as many reviewers were occupied with the COVID-19 crisis and took place between 3 April and 27 May 2020.

Box 1. List of external reviewers (in alphabetical order)

Andrew Amato, MD, MSc, Head of Section Air-Borne, Blood-Borne and Sexually Transmitted Infections, European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC), Stockholm, Sweden

Alvaro Borges, MD, PhD, Chief medical officer, Center for Vaccine Research, Statens Serum Institute, Copenhagen, Denmark

Ivana Bozicevic, MD, DrPH, Director, WHO Collaborating Centre for HIV Strategic Information, School of Medicine, University of Zagreb, Croatia

Nikoloz Chkhartishvili, MD, MSc, Deputy Executive Director for Research, Infectious Diseases, AIDS and Clinical Immunology Research Center (IDACIRC), Tbilisi, Georgia (reviewing proposals from outside Georgia only)

Ole Kirk, Professor, Dept of Infectious Diseases, Rigshospitalet, Copenhagen, Denmark

Daria Podlekareva, MD, PhD, Post Doc, Dept of Infectious Diseases, Rigshospitalet, Copenhagen, Denmark

George Rutherford, Professor, Epidemiology and biostatistics, Director, Prevention and Public Health Group, School of Medicine, University of California San Francisco, USA

Nicole Seguy, MD, HIV/Viral Hepatitis Unit lead, WHO Regional Office for Europe, Copenhagen, Denmark

Anders Sönnnerborg, Professor, Infectious Diseases, Karolinska Institute and Karolinska University Hospital, Stockholm, Sweden

Virginie Supervie, PhD, researcher, INSERM, Paris, France

Lara Tavoschi, MSc, MPH, PhD, University of Pisa, Italy

Box 2. List of internal WEEPI reviewers (WEEPI Secretariat, in alphabetical order)

Niklaus Labhardt, MD, Swiss Tropical and Public Health Institute and University Hospital Basel, Basel, Switzerland

Dorthe Raben, MSc, CHIP, Rigshospitalet, Copenhagen, Denmark

Annemarie Stengaard, CHIP, Rigshospitalet, Copenhagen, Denmark

2.3 Advisory Board role

The 13 best rated proposals (i.e. those that scored $\geq 75\%$ of the highest possible rating by the reviewers = 41 points) were subsequently compiled and shared with the WEEPI Advisory Board members for their appraisal and discussion at a meeting held by videoconferencing on 12 June 2020.



The Advisory Board consists of a number of experts selected from leading European clinical associations or learned societies, non-governmental community organisations involved in HIV, viral hepatitis and TB and key public health organizations (box 3). In addition, a number of individual experts/clinicians with a significant role in the provision of HIV, viral hepatitis or TB clinical or public health services in countries of the eastern European region are invited as observers. The Advisory Board is tasked with discussing and providing recommendations to the Executive Board on the selection of proposals for funding. The Advisory Board can also advise on any methodological, technical or administrative shortcomings and recommended adjustments to be implemented before funding of a given project is granted.

The Advisory Board members have full access to the results of the detailed reviews but were also provided with a summary of the reviewers scores and remarks alongside a set of guiding principles outlining a number of considerations for the Board members to keep in mind when providing recommendations and prioritizing the proposals for funding. These principles consider the distribution of projects by disease area and country, organization (community or state), perspective for scale-up into a stage 2 project, budget appropriateness and overall quality and relevance.

Box 3. List of Advisory Board members

Andrew Amato¹, MD, MSc, Head of Section Air-Borne, Blood-Borne and Sexually Transmitted Infections, European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC), Stockholm, Sweden

Manuel Battegay^{1,2}, MD, Professor, University Hospital Basel and Basel University, Basel, Switzerland

Jens Lundgren^{1,2}, MD, Professor, CHIP, Rigshospitalet and University of Copenhagen, Copenhagen, Denmark

Nikoloz Chkhartishvili³, MD, Deputy Executive Director for Research, Infectious Diseases, AIDS and Clinical Immunology Research Center (IDACIRC), Tbilisi, Georgia

Masoud Dara, MD, WHO Regional Office for Europe

Maka Gogia, MD, European AIDS Treatment Group (EATG)

Jan Heyckendorf, MD, European Respiratory Society (ERS)

Helena Cortez Pinto, MD, European Association for the Study of the Liver (EASL)

Jürgen Rockstroh, MD, Professor, European AIDS Clinical Society (EACS)

Adrian Streinu-Cercel³, MD, PhD, National Institute for Infectious Diseases “Matei Bals”, Bucharest, Romania

Evgeny Voronin³, MD, Professor, Clinical Centre for HIV Prevention and Treatment in Pregnant Women and Children, Russian Federation

¹ Executive Board member

² Foundation Board member

³ Observer (with the same rights and responsibilities as other members, apart from the right to vote)

2.4 Executive Board role and final selection

All recommendations of the Advisory Board were discussed by the WEEPI Executive Board at a final decision meeting on 22 June 2020 and the final projects recommended for funding were selected. In total, five projects were recommended – all with a number of comments and queries to be addressed before finalization of the grant making. Further two projects were offered to resubmit revised proposals addressing the comments and recommendations of the reviewers and the Advisory Board, aiming to support a final decision regarding their possible funding. Adjustments, re-submissions and contractual



processing took place during July and August 2020. A list of funded projects with brief project summaries is available at <https://weepi.org/projects>.

3. Conclusions and next steps

The WEEPI Foundation has successfully launched and completed the selection of funded projects following its first call for proposals. This was made possible due to the crucial contribution of the external reviewers and the Advisory Board and of course due to the generous support of the private donor. Following this first application round, WEEPI will be further developing its application and review processes in light of lessons learned from this first round. Successful stage 1 projects will be eligible for submission of stage 2 project proposals in 2021.