THE EUROPEAN ESTHER ALLIANCE

BRINGING TOGETHER OUR EXPERTISE FOR CAPACITY BUILDING AND QUALITY HEALTH CARE
The European ESTHER Alliance contributes to the implementation of its member states policy for health sector development aid. It aims to build up capacities in the fight against HIV/AIDS and its associated infections in developing countries.

**AN INITIATIVE TO COUNTER NORTH-SOUTH INEQUALITIES IN HEALTH**

The ESTHER Initiative (Together for a Networked Hospital Therapeutic Solidarity) was launched in 2002 by France with the main goal to strengthen the capacities of Southern countries to combat HIV/AIDS and associated pathologies. A first group of countries (Spain, France, Italy, and Luxembourg) undertook to develop this initiative in April 2002. At this time, a European Secretariat was set up in France. Four additional States joined the group in March 2004 (Germany, Austria, Belgium and Portugal). The arrival of Greece (September 2006) and Norway (November 2008) brought the number of European ESTHER Alliance members up to ten. All members have signed a ministerial declaration of engagement to develop the initiative. Potential new comers are invited to join the Alliance.

**BRINGING TOGETHER OUR STRENGTHS AND EXPERTISE**

The European ESTHER Alliance is a network of Governments favouring the networking of health professionals and associations from the European region who decided to work in synergy for fighting HIV/AIDS and its disastrous consequences in developing and transitional countries through a high standard comprehensive treatment and care approach, aiming thus at contributing to the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals and to Universal Access to HIV/AIDS prevention, treatment and care.

Members of the Alliance committed to develop the Initiative by implementing capacity building activities through twinnings between hospitals of the North and hospitals and health structures in the developing countries, in order to provide comprehensive and quality care for people living with HIV/AIDS and related diseases.

This European initiative receives direct support from the European governments who have mandated technical agencies or ministerial departments to set up programmes (GIZ in Germany, GIP ESTHER in France, NORAD and FK Norway in Norway, Ministry of Health, Social Policy and Equality and AECID in Spain, DGPS and ISS in Italy, IPAD and AIDS National Coordination in Portugal, Hellenic AIDS and KEELPNO in Greece, LUX DEV in Luxembourg).
A EUROPEAN AND OPERATIONAL PLATFORM FOR COUNTRY PARTNERS

From 2002 to 2010, the Alliance has developed projects in more than 40 partner countries in Africa, Asia, Latin America, the Middle East and South East Europe.

More than 120 programmes allowed implementing a wide range of twinning activities: Training for hospital professionals (30,000 people trained from 2002 to 2010: physicians, nurses, biologists, virologists, lab technicians, pharmacists, hospital management teams etc.), Prevention of Mother To child Transmission (PMTCT), Paediatric care, Patient and health professional safety, Psychosocial activities, Operational research, Monitoring and Evaluation, Laboratory support, Technical assistance at country level (e.g. on Drug and Supply management systems), Support for University diplomas, Networking with civil society.

The increasing number of hospital twinnings of the Alliance made possible expertise and resources pooling for joint projects development but also more specialised and targeted programmes toward most vulnerable populations (IDUs, Prisoners, women and girls etc.).

THE EUROPEAN ESTHER ALLIANCE SECRETARIAT
A JOINT MECHANISM FOR THE ALLIANCE’S DEVELOPMENT

The European Secretariat, based in Paris, receives financial support from the European ESTHER Alliance members to cover the coordinating and joint activities. The Secretariat provides logistical and technical support to organise joint meetings and events, favour networking and information sharing, develop external communication, set up joint projects and develop common tools. It also represents the European ESTHER Alliance, advocates towards new potential members and facilitates partnership and collaboration development between the Alliance and external actors.

EUROPEAN MEETING AND WORKING GROUPS
JOINT APPROACH AND COMMON TOOLS

The European Secretariat organises regular European meetings. They serve to hone a common strategy and develop a growing number of projects and joint efforts in partner countries. European working groups allow country members to exchange on their practices and design a joint approach and common tools for hospital twinnings implementation.
The Alliance also builds relations with international bodies such as the European Commission, United Nations’ agencies (WHO, UNAIDS, UNICEF, UNODC, etc.), the Global Fund to fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, the European and Developing Countries Clinical Trial Partnership (E.D.C.T.P).

In the 2009 “Progress report on the implementation of the European Programme for Action to Confront HIV/AIDS, Malaria and Tuberculosis through External Action (2007-2011)”, the European Commission acknowledged the European ESTHER Alliance as an innovative approach seeking to involve a large number of research and health institutions and civil society organisations in Member States and partner countries in capacity building through twinning programmes and networking.

These endeavours have led to the mobilisation of a global north-south network of health professionals, improving health systems in partner countries. It focuses mainly on care for HIV/AIDS, but addresses other pathologies or health problems too, such as tuberculosis, hepatitis, maternal and infant mortality, blood transfusion safety, patient safety, drug addiction. Particular attention is accorded to the most exposed or vulnerable population groups.
ADDED VALUE
AND LESSONS LEARNT

The European ESTHER Alliance initiative and approach represent a huge potential to mobilize expertise for capacity building in health and further contribute in the EU role in global health, respecting the Aids effectiveness principles.

The European ESTHER Alliance initiative is a good approach to contribute in the Global Funds and other funders programs (EC) implementation in country partners.

The ESTHER model and the twinning approach favor joint capacity development, with a lot of experience coming back to the European hospitals.

The twinning approach often works at individual level but remains challenging at institutional level. A system approach involving partners at clinical level, at hospital management level, and at sector level is key to a successful model and the quality of partnership.

The twinning approach allow implementing a wide range of activities such as: operational research combined with development cooperation; capacity building in hospital on specific care programs (e.g. PMTCT); capacity building in hospital for management; capacity building in specific settings and for vulnerable populations (prisoners, IDUs) etc.

The ESTHER model feeds the country partners authorities’ reflection for health policies and national guidelines definitions.

The ESTHER model and the twinning approach is adapted to widen the scope beyond HIV/Aids for capacity building program implementation related to MDGs 4, 5, 6, and health system strengthening.
**BACKGROUND**

The Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH coordinates Germany’s contribution to the ESTHER Alliance on behalf of the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) through the ESTHER Germany Secretariat. The Secretariat instigates and facilitates hospital and university twinning arrangements, establishes and promotes networks between institutions in Germany and in partner countries and liaises with relevant ministries, the European Commission and other actors such as the European and Developing Countries Clinical Trials Partnership (EDCTP).

**COUNTRY PARTNERS**

As at 2010, ESTHER Germany is supporting partnerships with institutions from eight African countries and one Asian country. The partner institutions are predominantly national and regional hospitals. The German ESTHER network is comprised of Germany’s main medical and academic institutions specialising in HIV treatment and other relevant fields.

**North/South partnerships:**

- **Africa:**
  - Ivory Coast (Bouaké) → Germany (Cologne)
  - Cameroon (Bamenda) → Germany (Hamburg)
  - Cameroon (Limbe) → Germany (Rostock)
  - Ghana (Kumasi) → Germany (Hamburg)
  - Tanzania (Mbeya) → Germany (Munich)
  - Tanzania (Tanga) → Germany (Berlin)
  - Rwanda (Butare) → Germany (Berlin)
  - Uganda (Fort Portal) → Germany (Berlin)
  - Malawi (Lilongwe) → Germany (Heidelberg)

- **Asia:**
  - Nepal (Kathmandu) → Germany (Hamburg)

**South/South partnership:**

- Cameroon (Bamenda) → Tanzania (Tanga)

**BASIC PRINCIPLES**

ESTHER Germany aims to improve access to and raise the quality of services provided in the area of HIV prevention, treatment, care and support as well as services relating to other diseases. It strives to help partner countries meet the challenges they are facing with regard to their health systems. The twinned institutions engage in long-term partnerships, exchanging technical and scientific know-how, and drawing on the expertise of more than fifty internationally recognised experts and their institutions. The partners are encouraged to conduct joint operational research, approved by the respective ethics committees and carried out in accordance with national and international standards. For ESTHER Germany, operational research constitutes a promising tool for joint Capacity Development and is eligible for funding providing:

- it is based on the partners’ needs,
- it aims to improve the quality of medical services,
- it is conducted in an equal and participatory manner.
The partnerships build on institutional commitment and are aligned to national health and HIV policies and strategies. They complement regional and national programmes in partner countries, including German bilateral development cooperation programmes and other European ESTHER partnerships. The partnerships aim to develop effective interventions that can be scaled up countrywide.

The ESTHER Secretariat channels BMZ funds to support the following activities:
- short-term assignment of experts to provide technical support and advisory services
- training of staff in partner countries and in Germany as well as staff exchanges
- small-scale procurement of material and equipment
- joint operational research
- South-South exchange

In 2010, a study was carried out to review the activities and the results of four partnerships and the Secretariat.

Below are some highlights from the study:

Limbe Provincial Hospital, Cameroon - University of Rostock Medical School
- Medical personnel and researchers make use of improved lab infrastructure and the increased capacity of lab staff
- Publication of the first results of the research on Pneumocystis jirovecii resistance and the prevalence of opportunistic infections

Bombo Regional Hospital, Tanzania - Charité University - Medicine Berlin
- An existing Quality Improvement Assessment Tool was extended to ART, VCT and PMTCT
- Publication of the first results of the research on Pneumocystis jirovecii resistance and the prevalence of opportunistic infections

Kamuzu Central Hospital Lilongwe, Malawi - University Hospitals Bonn, Heidelberg, and Cologne
- Development of protocols and guidelines for the management of 13 medical conditions

Bamenda Provincial Hospital, Cameroon - University Medical Centre Hamburg Eppendorf and Bernhard-Nocht-Institute
- Implementation of “Continuous Medical Education”
- Implementation of an infection control programme

Between 2007 and 2009, approximately 100,000 PLHIV were reached through the interventions of the ESTHER Germany’s eight partnerships.
BACKGROUND

ESTHER programme has contributed to broaden the number of countries with which European Alliance works including some countries from Latin America. Currently, there are seven countries included, namely: Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua.

HOSPITAL PARTNERSHIPS

Health professionals who participate in the ESTHER programme are well acquainted with the clinical practice with HIV patients and have a strong commitment with the programme and the health situation in impoverished countries.

These professionals work in hospitals of different regions in Spain and their contribution to the programme is a voluntary labor.

OBJECTIVES AND ACTIVITIES

The main goal of ESTHER programme is to contribute to improve health care provided to patients with HIV infection in the country partners with special emphasis on increasing the coverage of diagnosis, prevention of mother-to-child transmission and clinical and pharmacological management of patients.

A health professional network has been generated and works with HIV patients in hospitals of 2nd and 3rd level to promote the exchange of updated knowledge based on scientific evidence.

The activities in the programme include training workshops in the country partners, hospital rotations in Spain and the online Master officially accredited by Rey Juan Carlos University, with 1,100 teaching hours equivalent to 60 European credits.
The ESTHER Spain Committee is made up of two people of each institution forming part of the Committee. These institutions are, on behalf of the Spanish Ministry of Health, Social Policy and Equality, the Spanish National AIDS Strategy Secretariat, the Subdirectorat-General for International Relations and the Spanish Foundation for International Cooperation, Health and Social Policy (FCSAI), and on behalf of the Spanish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation, the Spanish Agency for International Cooperation and Development (AECID).

The Committee coordination role is exerted by the Spanish National AIDS Strategy Secretariat and the committee meetings are held at least biannually.

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**MONITORING**

ESTHER Spain monitoring is carried out at two levels, the hospitals and the National AIDS Strategies.

The periodicity of the data collection is performed every six months or annually depending on the availability of each country.

This monitoring system contributes to the European ESTHER Alliance M&E System.

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ESTHER France facilitates hospital twinning and CSOs partnerships elaborated through a demand driven process from the country partners. Capacity building to provide comprehensive care to PLWHA is a key issue. ESTHER France works closely with the national authorities and provides support to National Aids Control Programmes (NACPs).

ESTHER France also mobilises expertise for health systems strengthening in the field of HIV, tuberculosis, co-infections and opportunistic infections, drug and supply management and operational research, monitoring and evaluation.

ESTHER means “Together for a Networked Hospital Therapeutic Solidarity”. The initiative, launched in 2001 by France, is founded on hospital twinnings and the sharing of skills so as to provide comprehensive care for people living with AIDS (PLWA). The Ministry for Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Health set up in 2002 the GIP ESTHER (Public Interest Group) as a governmental technical and cooperation agency to manage the French ESTHER initiative. GIP ESTHER also hosts the European ESTHER Alliance Secretariat and supports its developments.

ESTHER France operates through hospital twinnings mobilising health care professionals in the improvement of medical practices through assistance and support: doctors, pharmacists, nurses, laboratory technicians, administrators. Some fifty French hospitals are thus twinned with 78 reference hospitals and more than 100 decentralised sites offering medical care.

ESTHER France supports local/national civil society organisations in partner countries that offer medical care and support to people with HIV/AIDS. Capacity building and support towards CSOs improve PLWHA access to care and better health.
THE LIAISON COMMITTEE

The liaison committee meets twice a year, under the chairmanship of the Ministry of Health and the country’s health authorities, and undertakes regular reviews of all the parties involved (countries in the North and South). These meetings include discussion and debate on future strategic perspectives and the continuity between activities unfolding and the national HIV strategy.

COORDINATION

The coordinator in a partner country aims to facilitate in-country project roll out by helping partners carry out their activities as planned. The coordination is ESTHER’s reference person for the country. The Project Manager, based in Paris facilitates project set up, roll out and monitoring.

SOMES FIGURES

- 70 medical teams from French hospitals involved in about 150 hospitals and health facilities in 18 country partners
- 150 NGOs partners
- 20,000 practitioners trained since 2002

ESOPE Software for patient monitoring and national data collection adopted at national level by 5 countries

MONITORING AND EVALUATING

Once a project has been set out, specific monitoring indicators are defined so project progress can be measured. ESTHER France offers free access to ESOPE, a patient monitoring software programme, on its internet site (www.esther.fr). The software provides individual patient follow up (electronic medical file), management of site-specific patient programmes (activity and cohort report) and the production of national statistics and indicators for national evaluation follow up (forwarding and compilation of cohort data at national level).

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MINISTÈRE DES AFFAIRES ÉTRANGÈRES ET EUROPÉENNES
Photos: DR
ESTHER ALLIANCE - GREECE

The initiative is supported by:

1. The Directorate General for International Development Cooperation (Hellenic Aid) - Ministry of Foreign Affairs.
2. The Hellenic Center for Disease Control and Prevention (HCDCP) - Ministry of Health and Social Solidarity.

IMPLEMENTED PROGRAMS

   Three month training for graduate medical students and post graduate medical students from Nigeria in the following subjects: HIV/AIDS, TB, co-infections (HIV/TB-HIV/HBV-HIV/HCV).
   • Partners: Hellenic aid, “A.SYGROS University hospital of Dermatological/Venereal Diseases” (Athens), NGOs “ACT UP”, HelMSIC.

   Provision of equipment and medical personnel and technicians training in modern diagnostic methods with main goal being the safety in blood donation as well as diagnosis of blood borne diseases, the management and follow up of patients with TBC or STDs.
   Public awareness campaign about STDs & HIV/AIDS as well as TBC.
   • Partners: Hellenic aid, University Hospital of Ioannina, Hospital of Argyrocastro.

3. Middle East-Syria (2007-2008)
   Provision of medical equipment and doctors and technicians training in modern diagnostic methods with the main goal being safety in blood donation as well as diagnosis of blood borne diseases as well as the management and follow up of patients with TBC and STDs. For the gynecological hospitals the main goal was prenatal and maternal care.
   • Partners: Hellenic aid, University hospital of Ioannina, University hospital “AL MUASA”, Gynecological hospital “AL ZAHRAUL”.

FINANCING

The initiative is supported by:

1. The Directorate General for International Development Cooperation (Hellenic Aid) - Ministry of Foreign Affairs.
2. The Hellenic Center for Disease Control and Prevention (HCDCP) - Ministry of Health and Social Solidarity.

ACTIONS

• Training of healthcare personnel.
• Provision of medical equipment.
• Intervention programs for prevention of HIV mother to child transmission (MTCT).
• Pediatric care.
• Psychosocial support for PLWA.
• Capacity building activities of civil society/family.
• Monitoring and assessment of HIV infection.
• Technical assistance/upgrading of infrastructure.
This 3 years program will be effectuated by the university hospital of Thessaloniki AHEPA (unit of infectious diseases), the NGO “Médecins du Monde” and the NGO of the Greek Orthodox church.

The partners from the aid recipient countries are the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Alexandria and All Africa, the orthodox metropolis of Uganda, the orthodox metropolis of Central Africa in Congo and the Kimbagist hospital in Uganda.

The total budget of the project is up to € 2,910,000.

**ROLE OF THE AXEPA HOSPITAL**

- Upgrading of the existing infrastructure of a center for care of PLWA in Congo.
- Provision of laboratory equipment.
- Three months training for 20 doctors and 10 nurses on the topics of treatment, monitoring and following up of the PLWA.

**ROLE OF MÉDECINS DU MONDE**

- Setting up structures for the diagnosis, treatment and care of HIV + patients with opportunistic infections, monitoring and following up of the patients who are under antiretroviral treatment.
- Training hospital personnel in Uganda - Lweero Center of care for PLWA in Monde.
- Awareness activities of the local population and especially of the youth and the pregnant women.
- Provision of medical equipment as well as an ambulance/mobile unit in order to facilitate the transfer of patients.
- Training of the health personnel of the Kimbagist hospital (Kimbanseke, Kinsasa, Congo).

The NGO will create a centre for support and information about AIDS in Kinsasa, Congo that will offer:
- Psychosocial support for PLWA as well as of their families.
- Awareness activities with an emphasis on the youth and women.

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In March 2002, together with France, Luxembourg and Spain, the Italian Minister of Health ratified a «Statement on the ESTHER Cooperation Initiative» committing to jointly developing the «TOGETHER FOR A NETWORKED HOSPITAL THERAPEUTIC SOLIDARITY - ESTHER» program, in order to strengthen the skills and capacities of health structures in developing countries to care for people living with HIV/AIDS, in collaboration with United Nations organisations and the Global Fund for AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria.

A national program has been launched through the Italian Ministry of Health, which gave to the Italian National Institute of Health (ISS) the responsibility to coordinate the Initiative and launch a call for proposal. The ISS analysed the projects submitted by the Italian hospitals and allocated the funds to the selected programs.

It is essentially aimed at strengthening capacity of health care structures in the countries partner. This is in line with the 6th Millennium Development Goal referred to universal access in prevention, treatment and care of HIV/AIDS.

The Italian project of the ESTHER Alliance is an operational research program, funded by the Italian Ministry of Health and based on a network of Italian clinical centres twinned with a corresponding number of African clinical centres.

ESTHER ITALY DURING 2010 HAS WORKED IN THE FOLLOWING COUNTRIES:
- Burkina Faso,
- Cameroon,
- Ethiopia,
- Guinea Bissau,
- South Africa,
- Swaziland,
- Tanzania,
- Uganda.

COUNTRY PARTNERS
OPERATIONAL STRATEGY AND FUNCTIONING
Esther Italy operates through two levels of activities.

CAPACITY BUILDING.

The first level deals with the capacity building activities of each Italian clinical center in the corresponding African clinical center. All the activities, aimed at providing comprehensive care for people living with HIV/AIDS, have been designed with the participation and ownership of the local beneficiaries and mainly supply assistance and training to healthcare workers.

OPERATIONAL RESEARCH

The second level deals with the implementation of operational research. Research Group on HIV, Hepatitis & Global Health (Italian National Institute of Health) has been coordinating the CASA project (Cohort of African persons Starting Antiretroviral therapy), a open cohort study established with the support and the ownership of the local sites. The specific objective of the project is the improvement of HIV+ patients management by increasing access and use of clinical data, improving clinical skill of health care personnel, as well as following standard-of-care antiretroviral therapy guidelines.

The Italian clinical centers belonging to Esther project could be additional partners of this cohort study.

COORDINATION

Institutional Coordinator:
Fabrizio Oleari, Italian Ministry of Health, Department of the Prevention and Communication, General Direction of the Prevention Sanitary.

Scientific Coordinator:
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Coordination Group HIV, Hepatitis & Global Health
- Italian National Institute of Health.
- ISS-IT-unit in collaboration with IT-unit.
- Informatici Senza Frontiere
- ISF (Computer Scientists Without Borders).

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Norway’s ESTHER program is managed by FK Norway, which is a government body under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. FK Norway’s purpose is to contribute to sustainable development in the south and increased understanding of north-south issues in the north. The method is exchange of professional personnel through partnerships between companies, civil society organizations and government institutions in Norway and Africa, Asia and Latin-America.

All exchange projects through ESTHER Norway shall be based on reciprocity, implying that exchange of personnel takes place from north to south and vice versa, and between partners in the south (south-south exchange). The relation between the north-and south-partners is supposed to be based on equality. This is ensured through a joint planning process where both objectives and the practical implementation of the exchange are decided upon.

The ESTHER program in Norway provides a framework for ensuring better financing mechanisms and quality assurance in health related development cooperation between institutions in Norway and countries in the South. Improved education and service delivery in priority countries for Norwegian development cooperation, can contribute to solve the health personnel crises and to achieve the Millennium Development Goals for health. The program has a geographical focus on Africa, and has been running since 2008.

ESTHER NORWAY CAN SUPPORT

- Primary health care institutions and hospitals.
- Institutions educating health personnel both on basic and specialist level.
- Capacity building of medical-technical personnel and support for medical equipment (special cases).
- Quality assurance and quality systems.
- Information technology and telemedicine.
- Capacity building within administration and management.
North-south and south-north exchange takes place between Haraldsplass Deaconal Hospital in Norway and Nkhoma Hospital in Malawi. The aim of the project is to improve the emergency care and to establish two emergency units at Nkhoma Hospital; one for adults and one for children. In addition the project is aiming at improving the quality of the high risk care provided in the maternity, surgical and general wards, and in this way reduce mortality among critically ill patients, mothers giving birth and children being born. The project will also promote internationalization of Haraldsplass Deaconal Hospital.

A three-party exchange of personnel takes place between Sophies Minde Ortopedi AS in Norway, Cambodian School for Prosthetics and Orthotics in Cambodia, Tanzanian Training Centre for Orthopeadic Technologists in Tanzania and Kamuzu Central Hospital in Malawi. The project is aiming at improving the training of prosthetists/orthotists in new technologies and materials by exchanging teaching staff and to improve the services to disabled people in need of artificial limbs by exposing staff to new methods and techniques.

**EXAMPLES OF COOPERATION**

**WHERE WE WORK**

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