

# Supporting research during the pandemic: How the Swiss National Science Foundation has responded to COVID-19

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As the foremost research funding organisation in Switzerland, the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF) plays a key role in promoting scientific research in Switzerland. In 2019, the SNSF supported 18,900 researchers with over 1 billion Swiss francs in order to promote research that benefits society, the economy, and politics. All three of these areas have been dramatically affected by the COVID-19 pandemic – with profound national and international consequences. This article provides an overview of the SNSF's national and international responses to the pandemic, discusses the challenges the SNSF has faced during the pandemic, and highlights lessons learnt so far.

## National Response

In spring 2020, the SNSF launched two initiatives to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic:

1. [Special call for research on coronaviruses](#): An initial 10 million Swiss francs were awarded to 36 research projects. Financial returns recently allowed the SNSF to award an additional 1.9 million Swiss francs to nine more projects through this call.
2. [National Research Programme "Covid-19" \(NRP 78\)](#): A total of 28 research projects are being funded to find innovative solutions and develop public health recommendations for the COVID-19 pandemic. The NRP 78 operates with an overall budget of 20 million Swiss francs, and its research projects run for two years.

These projects, as well as those funded by Innosuisse and the European framework program Horizon 2020, are listed in the SNSF's [COVID-19 project registry](#). More information on funded projects can also be found in the "[News room](#)" section of the SNSF's website.

In addition to the above-mentioned initiatives, the SNSF initiated other measures in spring 2020 to support researchers, including prolonging the call deadline for project funding, extending mobility fellowships, issuing grant extensions, and providing additional funding to bridge gaps. Furthermore, the SNSF has been invited by the State Secretariat for Education, Research and Innovation (SERI) to identify topics with societal,

economic, and politically pressing challenges to the current pandemic and to formulate key questions associated with the thematic areas.

## **International Response**

The SNSF's immediate responses to the pandemic were focused on national issues and challenges facing researchers in Switzerland (see measures outlined above). However, as a member of the Global Research Collaboration for Infectious Disease Preparedness (GloPID-R) network, the SNSF has communicated and aligned its activities related to COVID-19 with the other members of GloPID-R since the beginning of the pandemic. In addition to regular meetings and updates to coordinate funding activities, there have also been workshops with projects leaders who received funding for their COVID-19 research. The aims of these activities are to join forces, avoid redundancies, and share first data.

Both of the SNSF's initiatives listed above were open to international collaborators as co-applicants, thus allowing the best experts to develop a project together. The SNSF particularly promotes early and open access to data and publications for research activities related to COVID-19. In addition, the SNSF has financially supported the World Health Organization's global Solidarity trial, which produced conclusive evidence in record time on the effectiveness of repurposed drugs for COVID-19 (cf. article on Solidarity).

## **Challenges**

The urgency to react to the pandemic and the associated time pressure have been the main challenges for the SNSF. Urgent timelines necessitated a novel approach to preparing and implementing the new special call on coronaviruses and the National Research Programme "Covid-19". Time pressure has also presented challenges for recruiting international scientists in the various projects' fields for their evaluation processes. During this global crisis, the vast majority of scientists are already involved in similar activities or initiatives, both in their own countries and internationally.

Responding to the pandemic required a significant amount of coordination. Although very useful, coordinating research activities with national and international partners under so much time pressure was also quite challenging from a legal and procedural perspective because the regulations of two different funders had to be taken into account. Despite reasonable intentions, not all of the partners' wishes or demands could be considered due to regulatory constraints. In addition, the time pressure and workload made it quite a challenge to optimise the coordination between the federal administration, the Swiss National COVID-19 Science Task Force, and the SNSF.

It was challenging to address the needs arising from the global pandemic and manage the SNSF's routine work at the same time. As a result, the SNSF's regular work suffered from some delays. Further challenges included the increased pressure on the SNSF's budget reserve as a result of all the special measures needed and the continuing efforts to maintain the SNSF's high quality standards throughout an accelerated evaluation procedure.

## **Lessons learnt**

Thanks to excellent cooperation – between divisions and across the organisation – as well as the enormous effort and dedication of everyone involved, the SNSF has been able to tackle the challenges related to the current COVID-19 crisis and also learn from them. Several of the newly implemented processes may become permanent procedures at the SNSF (e.g. the peer review process and virtual conference formats). And in the future, the SNSF can apply the following learnings from the pandemic: ensure a proper balance between rushing forward and careful, detailed planning; try to avoid a "covidisation" of research; and consider the long-

term impact of immediate measures and needs (effects on the budget, immediate open access vs the protection of intellectual properties, etc.).