At the end of 2012, the scientists of the Lithuanian Nature Research Centre Institute of Botany Phytopathogenic Microorganisms Laboratory, in cooperation with the partners from the Swiss Federal Institute for Forest, Snow and Landscape Research (WSL), initiated the CONTROLDIEBACK project, which was financed by the Lithuanian-Swiss Cooperation Programme Research and Development.

Currently, the project “Incidence of Mycoviruses in Epidemic and Post-Epidemic Populations of Ash Dieback Pathogen Chalara Fraxinea and Evaluation of Their Potential for Biological Control of the Disease” is nearing its end. Thus, the research and discoveries of the Lithuanian scientists and Swiss partners as well as the significance of the three-and-a-half year project for the preservation of the European nature can be summarized.

Ash dieback plagues Europe

Few are aware that ash dieback is a serious issue in the European forests. No European country is free of it. Common ash (Fraxinus excelsior) dieback has been taking place for...
almost two decades (in Lithuania for over 15 years), and there is hardly a healthy stand left, with old and young trees succumbing to the disease. Unfortunately, no reasonable means of fighting this disease have been found yet, and the outlook for growing ash as a forest tree remains unclear.

The scientists of the Nature Research Centre started looking for the reasons behind and possible solutions to this problem. By implementing a EUR 627,106 project (led by Dr. Vaidotas Lygis) of the Lithuanian-Swiss Cooperation Programme, they focused on determining the biological and ecological properties of the Lithuanian and Swiss populations of the pathogenic fungus Hymenoscyphus fraxineus, which causes ash dieback, and the manifestation of mycoviruses that are harmful to the fungus inside it, and preconditioning the control of this dangerous disease across Europe.

**Research results were exciting**

According to project manager Dr. Lygis, the idea to start such research was sparked by realising that a lot of information could be obtained by analysing the contrasting records of ash dieback: “Ash dieback is not a new thing to Lithuania, in our country the disease has reached its chronic stage, but in Switzerland ash dieback has started somewhat recently and is only in its epidemic stage. Thus, we studied the spread dynamics of the disease from the genetic perspective by comparing its epidemic and chronic stages. We assumed that the Lithuanian and Swiss populations of Hymenoscyphus fraxineus were genetically different.”

The scientist added that such a hypothesis proved to be false: “Apparently, not enough time had passed for such genetic changes to occur. So we continued our research and answered the question regarding non-expressed genetic differences. And that is good news, because if we had discovered such differences, then we would have had to talk about an even greater threat: the fact that the disease is mutating and changing fairly quickly, making it even more difficult to find effective means of biological control.”

Besides other studies, another project goal was to identify such means. “Our Swiss partners focused more on this area. We have amassed a lot of information and conducted numerous experiments, and can indicate with confidence which means would be ineffective. Sadly, we have not found an effective one yet,” Dr. Lygis said.

**Support allows expensive and needed experiments to be conducted**

Dr. Lygis stated that the support received from the Lithuanian-Swiss Cooperation Programme ensured the best research conditions. “The latest laboratory research is not only efficient, but also really expensive. I guess without the funding, we would only have been able to conduct theoretical speculations on this major issue. And now we have completed the actual genetic research and experiments.”

Eleven projects were selected as eligible for funding under the Lithuanian-Swiss Cooperation Programme Research and Development, receiving a total of over EUR 7.3 million of support. The average funding per project was EUR 666,052, and the average duration was 40 months.

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**2006.02.27** the European Commission and the Swiss Confederation signed a Memorandum of Understanding.  

**2007.12.20** the Republic of Lithuania and the Swiss Confederation signed a bilateral Framework Agreement and created the Lithuanian-Swiss Cooperation Programme.  

**2017.06.14** All project agreements under the Lithuanian-Swiss Cooperation Programme were signed; funds were allocated to Lithuania and must be used by 14/06/17.
Beneficial changes to delivering women, newborns and staff at Mažeikiai Hospital

Public institution Mažeikiai Hospital has been enjoying changes for quite some time now. The staff is happy about the improved working conditions in the Obstetrics-Gynaecology and Neonatology divisions, and patients as well as newborns can expect to be cared for using the latest technology.

The conditions at Mažeikiai Hospital, just like in other 26 medical institutions in Lithuania, have changed after the implementation of the projects of the Lithuanian-Swiss Cooperation Programme “The Implementation of Energy-saving Technologies in Lithuanian Hospitals that Provide Healthcare Services to Pregnant women, Women Giving Birth and Newborns” and “Improving the Healthcare of Pregnant Women, Women Giving Birth and Newborns in Lithuania”.

Over EUR1.1 million was allocated to improve conditions of the Obstetrics-Gynaecology and Neonatology divisions of the hospital.

One of the major works completed during the implementation of projects was the renovation and insulation of the medical block’s southern façade of the hospital and the outfitting and glazing of the balconies. According to the Director of the hospital, Albinas Lidžius, this hygiene-sensitive division used to experience numerous inconveniences during the change of seasons – at the end or start of a heating season, as the premises used to get very cold and those at the southern side of the building – very warm. Now that the building has been renovated and equipped with a modern and quality air conditioning ventilation system, the aforementioned problems were solved.

Being able to ensure constant temperature

The major part of the funds was used to purchase and install a recuperative heating-ventilation system. This equipment allows to constantly maintain a proper temperature and humidity in maternity wards and, what is very important to the hospital, to use the heat efficiently.

The doctors notice that a safe environment is very important to newborns, and one of its requirements is a temperature of at least 23 °C in the premises. Previously, Mažeikiai Hospital had cases when air temperature in the maternity wards used to fall rapidly, resulting in the need to use heaters. But this was inefficient and unsafe. Besides, when the premises got too hot, there were no ways of ventilating them without damaging health of the women giving birth and the newborns. Whereas the ventilation and heating systems have been replaced, a constant temperature can be maintained in the maternity wards.

Saving energy and funds

According to the Director of the hospital, financial assistance allowed not only to substantially renew the infrastructure and engineering networks of the hospital built in 1980 resulting in better conditions in the Obstetrics-Gynaecology and Neonatology divisions, but also to ensure autonomy of the hospital and its ability to adjust air temperature and other parameters, thus allowing to maintain proper conditions and to decrease operational and heating expenses of the hospital.
Targeted support helps to reveal and to improve skills of the handicapped

The employment and integration into the labour market and community of the mentally handicapped is still a big challenge for the Lithuanian society. They often remain unnoticed and are usually described as having special needs. And that is true. But, at the same time they are gifted in a way, bestowed with huge sensitivity to the world and people, an ability to see and perceive things differently.

To cherish and to improve these gifts, both the mentally handicapped and their relatives need support and help. Not by snatches, on occasion, but continuously and systematically, in such a way that these people could truly feel to be needed, valuable and useful to the society.

This kind of support has been provided for several years by public institution The Blessed Jurgis Matulaitis’ Social Centre.

Investing into product quality

The Centre was able to implement the Project “Workshop for the Mentally Handicapped”, which lasted more than for a year and a half (from January 2013) thanks to the support of the Lithuanian-Swiss Cooperation Programme NGO Fund. This Fund is dedicated to strengthening positions of the non-governmental sector (the so-called “third sector”) and ensuring its independence and sustainability.

The total amount of funding for this Project exceeded EUR 63,000, of which almost EUR 49,000 – assistance and EUR 8,600 – co-financing.

During the implementation of the Project, the goal was to create a sustainable assistance system by expanding a woodwork workshop, where the mentally handicapped could make various items from wood, to decorate and sell them.

A similar activity has taken place earlier at The Blessed Jurgis Matulaitis’ Social Centre, but the manufacturing capabilities were limited and the products were not too saleable. Therefore, the decision was made to invest not only in staff training and improvement of its skills as well as motivation through various training events, but also in the development of a technical base which would allow to manufacture more and better products. According to the project accountant, Renata Jureko, the latter part of the project took the greater portion of assistance.

Ideas alone are not enough

In Europe, great examples and ideas how to create communities, day and employment centres for the mentally handicapped are aplenty. The staff of The Blessed Jurgis Matulaitis’ Social Centre acquired experience and collected ideas when visiting the Community of the Ark in France.

However, the Lithuanian-Swiss Cooperation Programme helped to implement and to materialise the ideas. The material base has been strengthened, new equipment to increase the quality of products has been purchased and the staff’s competences and skills regarding the work with the mentally handicapped have been improved. Besides, the investments were made in product advertising to increase attractiveness of products and to expand trading channels by ensuring financial stability and consistent development. Also, the items made by the mentally handicapped are now available online.
Remote sessions – for more effective court operations

Courts sometimes encounter a problem when people cannot attend a session due to various reasons or their participation is difficult and expensive to organise. To eliminate this problem, the Lithuanian courts have installed a system that allows organising remote sessions and recording and saving their data in electronic format. A request to participate in a court session remotely can be submitted by the participant of a session or it can be organised on the court’s initiative.

In order to speed up hearings, ensure proper exercising of the rights of a session participant and to decrease court procedure-related expenses, the National Courts Administration has been implementing an individual project of the Lithuanian - Swiss Cooperation Programme: “The Creation and Implementation of the System for Video Transmission, Recording and Storage in Courts”.

New system saves time and money

This videoconferencing equipment has been installed in Vilnius Regional Administrative Court as well. According to Chairman of the Court Ina Kirkutienė, the system is operational and being used. “One particularity of our work is that claimants are usually prisoners who submit complaints. Since every person has to be granted the ability to participate in a court session, we had previously spent a lot of money to ensure this right. Today, we are able to hear such cases remotely. The funds of the State are obviously being saved.”

She also added that the system not only ensured more effective court procedures, but also improved the situation in Vilnius Lukiškės Remand Prison-Closed Prison: “Lukiškės Remand Prison-Closed Prison has a very serious issue with free room, even the inmates are complaining, and now, with the ability to organise videoconferences, we do not have to bring convicts, say, from Alytus or Marijampolė to Vilnius so that they can attend a court session. Previously, convicts used to be brought to Vilnius and waited from one to several days at Lukiškės Remand Prison-Closed Prison for the session. Now, everything is much more effective.”

Available to all law enforcement institutions

Thanks to the Lithuanian-Swiss Cooperation Programme, the system that allows organising remote sessions was installed in 18 courts, 13 prisons and 2 prosecutor’s offices, and the National Courts Administration was fitted with the main equipment so that the system can function. If needed, the portable video transmission, recording and storage equipment can be delivered to any court in the appropriate jurisdiction, thus, remote sessions can be organised in all courts. The total value of the project is EUR 1,524,685, 85% of which was donated by Switzerland, and 15% – allocated from the State budget of the Republic of Lithuania.

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Project “Workshop for the Mentally Handicapped”

Project “Incidence of Mycoviruses in Epidemic and Post-Epidemic Populations of Ash Dieback Pathogen Chalara Fraxinea and Evaluation of Their Potential for Biological Control of the Disease”. Programme: Research and Development

Project “The Creation and Implementation of the System for Video Transmission, Recording and Storage in Courts”

Swiss contribution – for real and targeted works