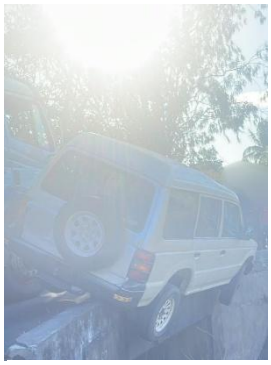
Connecting dots in Global Health: Pia's PhD journey!

Pia's journey with the group started back in 2021 – in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic – where she supported the group for a year in the scope of her master's thesis in health sciences. After this year, apparently, she was still passionate enough about the topic of neglected tropical diseases (NTDs) and women's health to start her PhD with our group in 2023, where she investigated holistic approaches to prevention, diagnosis, and care through integrated women's health services in rural areas of Madagascar. And now, three years later, she successfully defended her PhD on the 8th of June! So today, we would like to interview Pia on her experiences during the PhD, her journey, and future goals!

How would you describe your PhD journey from a scientific point of view?
If I would have to describe my scientific journey during this time in three words, it would be challenging, rewarding, and curious.

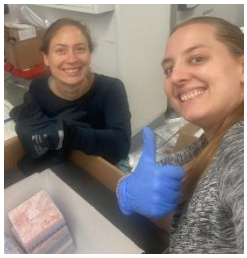


Some bridges did present, in fact, a bit more challenging than others...

Challenging, because you need to learn a lot of new methods. In my case in the areas of quantitative and epidemiological methods, qualitative and sociological methods, but also in the areas of project management, policy, and science communication. Additionally, I needed to learn how to navigate unexpected challenges (which **surprise** do occur on a regular basis when implementing projects in low-resource settings!), how to mitigate blockages (and bridges!), and find alternative ways to reach the goal. Though, I also experienced that most challenges can be mitigated by a great team that constantly works together to find solutions.

Rewarding were the many incredible experiences: From being able to visit multiple international conferences and being inspired by many great researchers, to diving into a different research context in the scope of my 2-months laboratory rotation at the Bordeaux Population Health Centre, and my field visit in Madagascar, where I was able to see project implementations and connect with Malagasy researchers. Additionally, it was a great (but also challenging) experience to have the booklet on the contribution of German Institutions on NTD research printed and presented at the Bundestag, next to my everyday PhD research.

Being able to show perspectives on health from multiple angles. For example, in the form of community-drawn artworks.



Learning from colleagues of different professions.

Curiosity is what drove me through the whole process of this PhD and which luckily, I still have today in me. Being curious is what makes you want to learn, experience, and discover new things all the time – and I hope this stays with me way beyond this PhD journey. As I complete my PhD, I am now equipped with a broad and interdisciplinary skillset, but also with an incredible amount of personal development, which will support me during my future career path.

What is the advice that you would give from your perspective to a young health scientist determined to pursue a career in Global Health?
Stay curious! If you are a student and you find a project that inspires you, go for it and write that e-mail to the PI – this is how I got in contact with the RG Implementation Research 😉 There will be other young researchers out there who are passionate about the same things as you and you can easily connect with them (for example, in networks like the working group on NTDs at the DTG). Also, if you hit that point during your journey one time, where you have the feeling that you are a jack of all trades but master of none, this is actually what is your great strength in the global health research world. You are the person that is able to connect the dots from multiple methods and points of view. Even though if this means you need to invest more time than others into mastering all of these different methods, it will be worth it at the end!

Is there anything that, looking back with the experience you gained so far, you would have done differently?
If I think about it, actually no. I highly value the experiences I made during this time, though this journey was not always an easy one – in the end I learned more than I was ever expecting about science, human connection, and also myself. Furthermore, I would not trade in the many people that I met along the way for anything! Be it great colleagues from Germany, Madagascar, France and beyond, or the inspiring people working in the affected communities – day by day bringing health for all closer to everyone.

Some examples of the many amazing people Pia got to know during her PhD journey!

Where do you see yourself in the next five years?
At this point in time, my research on female genital schistosomiasis and broader women's health as well as emerging diseases or science communication is way too interesting to stop here. So I see myself in the next five years for sure in the research world, evaluating campaigns and managing projects as well as supporting students on their way.

After that, let's stay curious for the future!

RG Implementation Research and friends after Pia's defense.