

One new member joined the GABRIEL network at the end of 2023: the Centro de Infectologia Charles Mérieux / Laboratório Rodolphe Mérieux of Rio Branco, Brazil.

This institution will make it possible to strengthen the presence of the GABRIEL network in South America, particularly in the Amazon region.

You can find out more about this new member in the following article:



The CICM/LRM (Centro de Infectologia Charles Mérieux / Laboratório Rodolphe Mérieux) is a level 2 and 3 biosafety laboratory located within the clinical hospital of the State of Acre (FUNDHACRE) in Brazil. It has recently joined the GABRIEL network, strengthening the regional commitment to research, molecular diagnosis, and training on endemic and tropical infectious diseases.

The mission is to deploy diagnostic tools and establish surveillance programs for emerging and resistant pathogens in this Amazonian region, and in the hospital environment, such as bacteria and yeast-like fungi, monitor multidrug resistance in tuberculosis, and diagnose respiratory viruses and arboviruses (such as dengue fever). The laboratory conducted advanced studies on chronic hepatitis (HDV).

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The laboratory is also dedicated to the continuous training and skills enhancement of health professionals, focusing on infectious diseases and investing in young researchers.

These activities are performed in partnership with Fiocruz Porto Velho, which shares its expertise in relevant regional public health issues, strengthening scientific and laboratory capacities.

Another priority is to improve strategies and efforts to raise financial resources to carry out these activities. Establishing international partnerships (including GABRIEL network partners) brings resources and visibility to the laboratory. At a national level, there are already effective collaborations with public universities, research centers, and research support foundations.



In summary, CICM/LRM is aligned with the diagnostic guidelines of the Brazilian Ministry of Health, regarding infectious diseases. Furthermore, its objective is to converge some activities with the GABRIEL network's goals. It aims to develop research on epidemiological surveillance of diseases of global health interest, focusing on vulnerable populations (indigenous and riverside communities). Finally, it is committed to

the continuous training of a pipeline of researchers and public health professionals.

The FCRM has established a publication history in many peer-reviewed journals, such as *The Lancet*, *Nature*, *Science*, *The Lancet Infectious Diseases*, *Nature Microbiology* (<https://www.fcrm-congo.com/publications>).

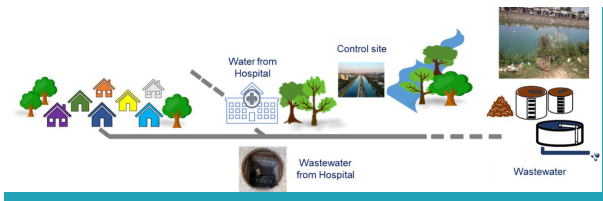
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Consortium Brazil, Cameroon and Madagascar: think out the spread of antimicrobial and biocide resistance from the wastewater to the environment

The COVID-19 pandemic emerged during a period of significant concern about antimicrobial resistance (AMR), a major global health challenge. Hygiene measures to prevent COVID-19, coupled with antimicrobial use, may impact AMR evolution. Antimicrobials and biocides used in hospitals and communities enter wastewater treatment plants (WWTPs) and can end up in natural systems, leading to pollution of water ecosystems with residues and antimicrobial-resistant bacteria (ARB). This increases AMR spread, posing indirect risks to human and animal health.

In low- and middle-income countries like Cameroon and Madagascar, untreated wastewater is often discharged directly into rivers and streams due to non-functional WWTPs. In Brazil, existing WWTPs do not completely eliminate antimicrobials and

biocides, contributing to AMR spread in surface waters. These contaminated water bodies are used for recreational activities and irrigation, further spreading AMR. In slums, the lack of WWTPs leads to direct contamination of water bodies, exacerbating the problem.



Studies on AMR spread in the environment, particularly in Europe, Asia, and the USA, have mostly focused on resistance characterization at specific sites, considering the selection pressure from environmental antimicrobials. The impact of COVID-19 on ARB persistence and spread remains undocumented.

The COV-AMR consortium (Cameroon, Madagascar and Brazil) aims to evaluate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the spread of antimicrobials and biocide resistance in the environment. From January to June 2022, monthly water sampling was conducted in healthcare facilities treating COVID-19 patients and control sites to screen for multidrug-resistant bacteria, analyze resistance determinants, and identify genetic relationships using whole-genome sequencing. Antimicrobial and biocide residues were quantified using liquid chromatography-mass spectrometry. The water microbiome was analyzed with the Ion Torrent platform and QIIME2 tool. The presence of SARS-CoV-2 was

investigated by RT-qPCR.

The study showed that during the COVID-19 pandemic, effluents from hospitals and urban areas in Cameroon, Brazil, and Madagascar facilitated AMR and biocide resistance spread in the environment. This exposure risks native bacteria acquiring resistance genes and populations facing hard-to-treat infections. Authorities must ensure WWTPs are functional to eliminate microbial flora and neutralize antimicrobial residues. Populations using contaminated water should observe strict hygiene. Governments should enforce regulations on hospital and municipal wastewater management, with periodic assessments and reporting of antimicrobial residues and resistance determinants.

The results of the study will help to raise public awareness of antimicrobial residue contamination and antimicrobial resistance, and alert people to the need to protect the environment and health.

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Transmission study of antimicrobial resistance



Pregnant women, as part of the immunocompromised population, are especially susceptible to bacterial infections. ESBL carriage during pregnancy can lead to life-threatening urinary tract infections, potentially affecting newborns due to fecal-vaginal transmission (Denkel et al., 2014; Bulabula et al., 2017). Our collaborative study with GABRIEL network countries—Bangladesh, Paraguay, and Brazil—aims to determine the prevalence of ESBL *E. coli* among healthy pregnant mothers in urban areas, alongside exploring the potential impact of companion animals on ESBL transmission. In Bangladesh, the institute for developing Science & Health initiatives (ideSHi) obtained approval from the IRB committee on April 25, 2023, and started participant enrollment on May 1st, 2023.

Preliminary data from Bangladesh revealed a significant ESBL carriage rate of 85% among pregnant women without companion animals, rising to 92% when animals were

present. Notably, 60% of companion animals carried ESBL *E. coli*. This high ESBL carriage prevalence, irrespective of the presence of companion animals, is unique to Bangladesh compared to other collaborating countries. These findings may explain why high rates of life-threatening bacterial infections are observed in certain settings in lower and middle-income countries like Bangladesh and indicates the emerging threat of overall increase of resistant bacteria.

Beyond phenotypic observations, the study aims to conduct whole-genome sequencing for 100 isolates to investigate strain types among human and animal paired samples, as well as longitudinal changes in *E. coli* serotypes among individuals. ideSHi will utilize its genomics platform (Illumina MiSeq) for sequencing. Reagent support from the GABRIEL network aids in continuing this research and generating high-throughput genomic data to better understand the situation.

The study's findings will highlight the link between companion animals and humans regarding ESBL circulation and shed light on the reasons behind high human gut carriage, especially in Bangladesh, which may be influenced by diverse factors irrespective of the presence of companion animals.

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Characteristics of hospitalized COVID-19 patients at admission and factors associated with clinical severity in low- and middle-income countries: an observational study

The SARS-CoV-2 virus, which emerged in December 2019 in Wuhan, China, rapidly spread worldwide. As of March 10, 2023, there were 676,609,955 confirmed COVID-19 cases and 6,881,955 deaths globally. Although the WHO declared the end of the COVID-19 global emergency on May 5, 2023, the virus continues to circulate despite widespread immunization efforts.

The pattern of COVID-19, including symptoms, recovery, and mortality rates, is influenced by the epidemiologic triangle: pathogen, host, and environment. Host-related factors such as older age and underlying comorbidities are independent risk factors for COVID-19 severity and mortality. In low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) like those in West Africa and South Asia, the population is predominantly young adults, suggesting potentially milder disease and lower mortality rates. However, the high prevalence of comorbidities among younger adults in LMICs may elevate the risk of severe disease. Additionally, overcrowded housing, co-circulation of various infectious agents, and weaker health systems lacking adequate intensive care units (ICUs) could impact disease outcomes in LMICs.

Despite extensive research on COVID-19 in high-income countries, little is known about the clinical characteristics and outcomes of patients in LMICs. This study aimed to

describe the clinical features and outcomes of laboratory-confirmed COVID-19 patients hospitalized in six LMICs during the first year of the pandemic. The observational, prospective, hospital-based multicentric study included participants from Bangladesh, Guinea, Ivory Coast, Lebanon, Madagascar, and Mali, from March 5, 2020, to May 4, 2021.

The study analyzed the clinical severity of COVID-19, defined as ICU admission or death, using multivariate logistic regression models to identify independent variables associated with disease severity. A total of 1,096 patients were included, with a median age of 49.0 years, ranging from 38.0 years in Mali to 63.0 years in Guinea. The overall clinical severity of COVID-19 was 12.3%, varying from 6.4% in Mali to 18.8% in Guinea. Cardiovascular diseases were independently associated with clinical severity in both age groups (<60 and ≥60 years), while diabetes was also a significant factor in patients under 60.

The study concluded that COVID-19 severity and mortality in LMICs are primarily driven by older age, but chronic diseases significantly increase severity risk, particularly in younger patients.

This study has been recently published in the American Journal of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene: <https://www.ajtmh.org/view/journals/tpmd/aop/article-10.4269-ajtmh.23-0456/article-10.4269-ajtmh.23-0456.xml>

We would like to thank all those involved in the study for their support in producing this relevant work at this difficult time for

COVID-19, and we look forward to future collaborations. All co-authors are cited in alphabetical order.

Marianne Abifadel, Kaousar Ahmmed, Sayera Banu, Ibrahima Camara, Fahmida Chowdhury, Daouda Coulibaly, Georges Dabar, Cedric Dananché, Rachel Daw, Zakiul Hassan, Magali Hervé, Ariful Islam, Florence Komurian-Pradel, Jean-Pierre Kouamé, Bourema Kouriba, Josette Najjar-Pellet, Andoniaina Rakotonaivo, Felana Ranaivo-Rabetokotany, Mandranto Rasamoelina, Tiavina Rasolofoarison, Moussa Riachi, Mitra Saadatian-Elahi, Luc Samison, Valentina Sanchez Picot, Sita Savané, Ismaila Thera, Abdoulaye Touré, and Philippe Vanhems

Addressing the issue of childhood TB diagnosis



The diagnosis and management of tuberculosis (TB) in children under 10 years of age represent a major global public health issue and are a priority for the WHO¹. In 2022, it is estimated that 1.25 million children and young adolescents (ages 0-14) contracted TB, but 51% of them were not diagnosed and reported². **It is urgent to develop rapid, accurate, and less invasive tests that do not rely on sputum for the triage**

and confirmation of childhood TB.

Several activities and initiatives are being developed within the GABRIEL network to contribute to this overarching objective:

Xpert Ultra stool evaluation as a diagnostic tool for TB in children: The icddr, b in Bangladesh has long been working on this approach³. Testing stools with Xpert-Ultra provides a more effective way of diagnosing bacteriologically positive childhood pulmonary TB. However, positivity varies by presenting symptoms/criteria suggesting requirement of carefully designed diagnostic pathway evaluation to ensure optimum use of limited diagnostic resources. Dr. Sayera Banu's team will soon publish the results and share their experience of a nationwide roll-out of this approach.

Evaluation of RISK6 as a diagnostic tool for childhood TB: RISK6 is a non-sputum-based blood test that was evaluated in 2021 within the GABRIEL network for diagnosing TB in adults⁴. It is currently being assessed as a triage test for TB in children in Bangladesh (DEDICATE study⁵).

Operational research aiming to improve the diagnosis of childhood TB: In line with the latest WHO roadmap to end TB among children and adolescents, the Mérieux Foundation, in collaboration with Institute national research biomedical and the non-profit organization 'One Health Conservation Initiative' (**Democratic Republic of the Congo**), Institut Pasteur de Madagascar (**Madagascar**), and Institut Pasteur du Cambodge (**Cambodia**), has co-developed the IDTB4Child operational research protocol. This protocol aims to enhance

the diagnosis of childhood TB through the implementation, performance evaluation, and cost-effectiveness assessment of TB Treatment Decision Algorithms (TDA), the new **RISK6 rapid test using a fingertip blood sample**, and other innovative approaches such as **breath tests**⁶ and **computer-aided detection digital chest X-rays**⁷, to improve the detection of TB in children and their household contacts.

Innovative strategies and new approaches for the prevention and diagnosis of childhood TB developed by several members of the GABRIEL network will be highlighted this year through a series of publications in the *International Journal of Tuberculosis and Lung Disease* (IJTLD). A session on this topic will also be held during the GABRIEL network meeting (November 27-29, 2024), with the aim of sharing experiences and exploring new opportunities for partnerships and funding for operational research projects to be implemented within the network.

¹WHO. Global tuberculosis report 2023. <https://www.who.int/publications-detail-redirect/9789240083851>.

²WHO | Roadmap towards ending TB in children and adolescents. WHO <http://www.who.int/tb/publications/2018/tb-childhoodroadmap/en/>.

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⁴Bayaa, R. et al. Multi-country evaluation of RISK6, a 6-gene blood transcriptomic signature, for tuberculosis diagnosis and treatment monitoring. *Sci Rep* 11, 13646 (2021).

⁵DEDICATE (blooD-basEd DlagnostiC of pAucibacillary Tb in bangladEsh). Mérieux Foundation <https://www.fondation-merieux.org/en/projects/>

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⁷Kagujje, M. et al. The Performance of Computer-Aided Detection Digital Chest X-ray Reading Technologies for Triage of Active Tuberculosis Among Persons With a History of Previous Tuberculosis. *Clinical Infectious Diseases* 76, e894–e901 (2023).

Jonathan Hoffmann, Mérieux Foundation

INSEQBIN: New online course on next generation sequencing and bioinformatics!



Bioinformatics plays an essential role in the analysis of biological data. By combining biology and computer science, it makes it possible to extract and analyze genetic information, opening the way to significant advances in a wide range of fields. Its applications in genomics are particularly important, notably for the study of evolution, personalized medicine, the discovery of new biomarkers or the surveillance of pathogens.

This is why we are delighted to announce the launch of our new online course, ‘Introduction to Next-Generation Sequencing and Bioinformatics’ (INSEQBIN), developed

in partnership with FIND and the Mérieux Foundation. Available from September 15, 2024 in French and English, this course offers six modules presenting Illumina and Oxford Nanopore sequencing technologies, as well as the key stages of bioinformatics analysis, namely quality assessment and raw data cleaning, sequence assembly, annotation of results, as well as sequence alignment and identification of genetic variations.

This course is targeted at students, laboratory technicians and researchers in biology, genetics or medicine who are involved in sequencing projects and wish to develop their knowledge of bioinformatics.

For more information and to register, please visit our dedicated page.

Emilie WESTEEL, Mérieux Foundation

GABRIEL member publications since September 2023

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The GABRIEL network receives support from bioMérieux

