

ex plore

The Volkswagen Foundation
and its international focus

A Foundation of Knowledge

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Exploring ...

... investigating, questioning: Science needs bright minds with a spirit of inquiry and the courage to break new ground. The Volkswagen Foundation promotes this pioneering spirit – from the humanities to the natural, engineering and life sciences. As one of the largest research funding foundations in Europe, every year we support research and higher education with about 200 million euros.

In doing so, we transcend the boundaries between subjects, disciplines, nations and continents. For about 60 years, we have been supporting projects all over the world and networking German science and scholarship with the international community. After all, science is international.

Be invited to embark on a voyage of discovery through the world of the Volkswagen Foundation: Who are we? What is important to us? What, who and how do we support?

Enjoy exploring!

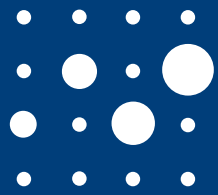
 VolkswagenStiftung

OFF THE BEATEN TRACK

“Silk roads” for nerves

An unusual scene for a medical university: Branches hang from the ceilings and walls, and spiders “rope down” their woven nets, closely watched by a young woman. At Hannover Medical School (MHH), plastic surgeon Prof. Dr. Christine Radtke was working on how to restore damaged nerves following an accident, for example. Because the threads of the Nephila spider are strong and sticky and have antibacterial properties, they are particularly well suited as guide rails for regenerating nerves. The spider silk is carefully removed from the living animal and then pulled through a vein where it serves the damaged nerve as a conductor during regrowth. The research done by Christine Radtke and her colleagues at the MHH was supported by the Foundation. Today, Professor Radtke holds the Chair of Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery at the Medical University in Vienna.





VolkswagenStiftung

1962

The Foundation

The Volkswagen Foundation (VolkswagenStiftung) is the largest private research funding organization and one of the major foundations in Germany. Its purpose is to support the humanities and social sciences as well as science and technology in research and higher education. It was founded by the Federal Republic of Germany and the State of Lower Saxony as an independent non-profit foundation under private law and started its activities in 1962. The Foundation is not affiliated with the Volkswagen company; it is based in Hannover.



Concept

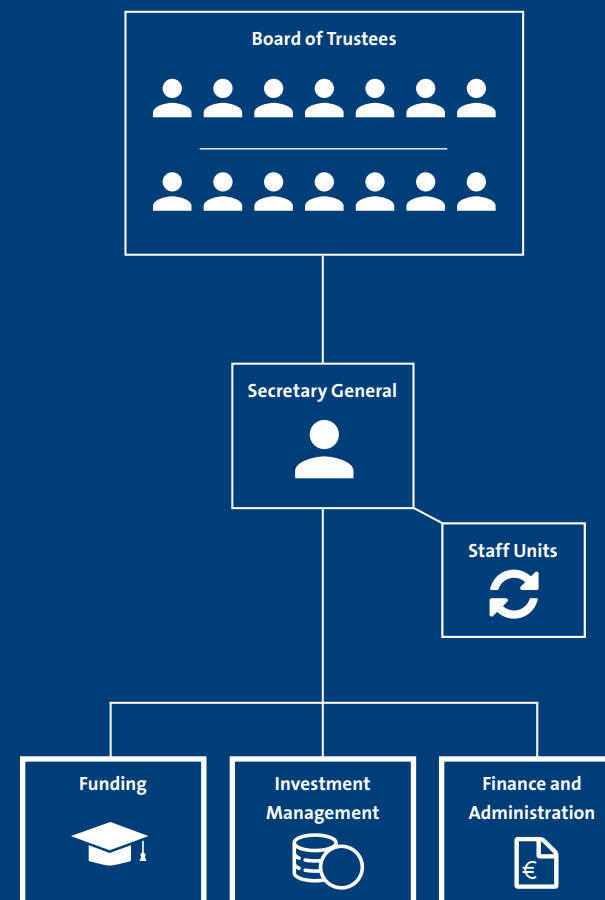
The Foundation strives to be an inspiring partner of the scientific community providing fresh impetus to the national and international research environment. Through carefully developing its funding initiatives, the Foundation heeds the requirements of research while taking into account the need to address the challenges facing societies worldwide. The focus is on opening up innovative fields of research, encouraging interdisciplinary approaches, and supporting outstanding, in particular young scholars. The Foundation also fosters cooperation beyond the borders of nation states and continents, opening up new options for interdisciplinary, multi-national research on global issues. The Foundation regards it as vital to ensure that these collaborations are based on balanced partnerships.

www.volkswagenstiftung.de/en/funding

Organization

Today, the Volkswagen Foundation has 100 employees, mainly organized in three divisions (Funding, Investment Management, Finance and Administration). Four staff units directly report to the head of the Foundation, the Secretary General. The Foundation is governed by a Board of Trustees comprising 14 eminent persons drawn from different domains of the scientific community and civil society. The Board usually convenes three times a year to discuss strategy and to decide on applications.

www.volkswagenstiftung.de/en/foundation/about-us



History

The Foundation owes its existence and its name to a treaty between the Federal Republic of Germany and the State of Lower Saxony which settled a controversy over the ownership of the “Volkswagenwerk” after World War II. The company was turned into a joint stock venture and proceeds from this privatization provided the endowment capital for the Foundation.

www.volkswagenstiftung.de/en/foundation/history



Capital and Funds

Today the Foundation capital amounts to about 3.5 billion euros. The funds allocated are generated from the investment of assets, mainly benefitting the area of “General Funding”. In addition there are profit entitlements accruing from 30 million Volkswagen shares held in trust by the Federal State of Lower Saxony (mainly dividends). These funds are allotted to research institutions in Lower Saxony in close cooperation with the state government (“Niedersächsisches Vorab”). In total the Foundation awards on average some 200 million euros per annum.

<https://www.volkswagenstiftung.de/en/foundation/assets>



Henrike Hartmann holds a doctorate in pharmacology and has headed the Foundation's funding department since 2015.

“Science is international.”

Dr. Henrike Hartmann, Head of the Funding Department, explains what makes the Foundation special.

How often do you have to explain to people that the Foundation has nothing to do with the VW automobile corporation?

Virtually all the time. This misunderstanding simply won't go away. We constantly have to explain that we support research in areas other than engineering. The Volkswagen Foundation is not a corporate foundation; it is independent. It was established by the Federal Republic of Germany and the State of Lower Saxony with proceeds from the partial privatization of the Volkswagen plant many years ago – hence the name.

What makes the work at the Volkswagen Foundation so special?

As Germany's largest private research funding foundation, we can initiate change: Both in terms of content as well as structural

development. We see ourselves as an innovative driver of change, and we are not afraid to take risks. The possibility that a project might not turn out to be successful does not deter us. This is especially important, as it encourages researchers to venture into new territory. That's what makes science and our work so fascinating.

What can you offer that other funding organizations can't match?

We have a very open statutory framework: We can be active in any field from theoretical physics to philosophy. And we can also grant funding to researchers in other countries. Promoting young talent, interdisciplinarity and international networking are particularly important to us.

Why does the Foundation support international projects?

Science is international. Furthermore, we want the best possible constellation in our thematically defined initiatives – and sometimes the best candidate for a project is not necessarily based in Germany.

We see ourselves as an innovative driver of change, and we are not afraid to take risks.

However, our statutes stipulate that the international projects we support must have some kind of anchor here. One must also consider: Many questions can no longer be answered at the national level. That is why we have created a large new funding umbrella for “Global Issues”.

What areas does this cover?

The focus here is on major global challenges such as social inequality, global health care and climate change. The strategy involves support for international consortia in which researchers from low and middle income countries work together with partners in high income countries.

Do you want to enter the field of development aid?

No. We don't see ourselves as an aid organization. We fund research. Everyone involved in the projects we support should work together as equal partners. In addition to their specific academic expertise, the researchers in the countries we're talking about contribute relevant local perspectives to the projects.



However, our goal is clearly also “capacity building” on the ground. We don't want to contribute to the brain drain.

How political is the Volkswagen Foundation?

We are independent and bound to a policy of strict neutrality. That is of great value. It is important for us to pick up on social developments and to ask what science can contribute to finding solutions: for example, regarding the crisis of democracy in Europe. We also offer platforms for an exchange on controversial topics such as gene editing, or we bring together researchers from Russia, the Ukraine and Germany in joint projects. By doing so, we are sending clear signals. But we will never position ourselves politically.

You promote innovation. How innovative is the Foundation itself?

We're always looking for new ways to do things. The fact that in two of our initiatives we have introduced a funding joker for reviewers, quasi as a mainstream blocker, caused quite a stir. The idea behind this is that a single reviewer is able to have an application approved for funding even if the panel disagrees on the project. And furthermore, we have introduced randomization in addition to the review process. This involves drawing lots.

You draw lots?

That's right. Peer review also has its limits and weaknesses. Especially very unusual ideas sometimes harbor great potential which is not immediately recognized. The Volkswagen Foundation also gives this type of research a chance.



CONCEPT AND FOCUS

How we work

The Volkswagen Foundation sees itself as a driving force that continually provides new scope for thought and action in research and higher education. With our support, we make high-quality research possible in all disciplines and initiate structural change. When selecting topics and funding areas, we are guided by the needs of researchers, but also by the challenges facing societies worldwide. A special focus is on motivating researchers to think creatively and on fostering cooperation across the borders of disciplines, cultures, and national states.

Our funding initiatives and calls for proposals are always geared to specific objectives, such as opening up new career opportunities for outstanding young researchers by enabling them to work independently or strengthening the position of so-called “rare subjects”. We devote particular care to the development of our funding offers; in their entirety they reflect the profile of the Foundation. This profile is not rigid but adapts to developments in the scientific community and society. That means that our funding offers are only valid for a certain period and then replaced by new initiatives and new perspectives.

As an autonomous institution, we are free to take risks in our priority-setting and in our funding decisions. Thus, innovative ideas and daring projects have a real chance. As an independent, neutral foundation, we can also address sensitive issues. Here, too, we act in a complementary manner to public funding.

As one of the Foundation's Fellows Katrin Kinzelbach (third from left) focused her research at the Global Public Policy Institute (GPPI) in Berlin on “Political Prisoners and Human Rights Compliance”. Today, she is Professor of International Politics of Human Rights at the University of Erlangen-Nürnberg.

How do children learn to speak? Language research and documentation in Papua New Guinea



Guinea. And soon there will be hardly anyone from whom the children can learn their native language”, the scholar from Cologne explains. First she learned Qaqet by ear, then she documented what she had heard and wrote a grammar of the language. Now, she is developing teaching materials for school-children. Her specific focus is on how two- to four-year-olds learn a language. The professor and her team want to know what the children hear from their parents, what from others, and how does this affect their speech? And above all: How do they learn? “Almost all studies on child language acquisition are oriented towards children socialized in the western world,” says Birgit Hellwig. “But how does this happen in a society in which books and the written language are not matter-of-fact components of everyday life?” Her thesis: Universal aspects of language acquisition in early childhood can be derived from the observed cultural differences and similarities.

For almost ten years now, the linguist Birgit Hellwig has regularly spent long spells living in the remote village of Raunsepna (see photo above) in the rainforest on an island in the Bismarck Archipelago, without electricity or Internet access. The inhabitants communicate in Qaqet, an endangered language spoken by only 15,000 people. “The younger generation only speaks Tok Pisin, the main language of Papua New



Birgit Hellwig is one of the Foundation’s Lichtenberg Professors. Her research on “Language Documentation and Psycholinguistics” continues the Foundation’s long-standing commitment to supporting studies in endangered languages.

www.volkswagenstiftung.de/en/language-documentation

Man-made photosynthesis Basic researchers want to optimize the conversion of carbon dioxide

For us humans, photosynthesis is one of the most important processes in nature – because without it there would be no plants and therefore nothing to eat. For about three billion years, certain bacterial species and plants have been using solar energy to convert carbon dioxide from the earth’s atmosphere into sugar. However, although the method is tried and true, it is by no means perfect. This is because the enzymes involved in photosynthesis are rather slow in performing their function. Prof. Dr. Tobias Erb from the Max Planck Institute for Terrestrial Microbiology in Marburg has discovered a possibility to optimize the photosynthesis process and to virtually reinvent it

in the laboratory. He combined different enzymes from very different organisms in such a way that they are able to process the carbon dioxide from the air in a much better and faster way. “In future, this mechanism could be used to produce chemical products or even fuels directly from carbon dioxide,” says Erb. And there is an extremely desirable side-effect: The mechanism would also remove part of the greenhouse gas carbon dioxide from the atmosphere. Cooperating with colleagues from the University of Marburg and the “J. Craig Venter Institute” in the USA, he plans to transfer artificial photosynthesis into living cells. “By doing so, I want to give evolution a little nudge,” says Tobias Erb. “We want to get a ‘designer cell’ to develop the new photosynthesis we’ve come up with, to improve it evolutionarily.” Building on this basic research, he hopes to find a way to convert carbon dioxide into useful products.



Tobias Erb’s research aims at new artificial metabolic processes in order to use CO₂ as a sustainable raw material.

The project “BRILIANCE – Bringing inorganic carbon to life with artificial CO₂-fixation in a minimal cell” is supported in the frame of the Foundation’s “Life?” Initiative. Further project partners are: Prof. Dr. Roland Lill, Institute of Cytobiology, Marburg, and Prof. Dr. John Glass, J. Craig Venter Institute, La Jolla, USA.

www.volkswagenstiftung.de/life



FUNDING INTERNATIONALLY

Global Issues? Global Research!

The world is facing major challenges, which can only be solved together. For this reason, the Volkswagen Foundation has been realigning its international promotion of science on a global scale – in addition to the long-standing regional focuses on Sub-Saharan Africa and Central Asia/Caucasus.

The new funding framework, titled **“Global Issues – Integrating Different Perspectives”**, is based on the “Sustainable Development Goals” of the United Nations. What is special: We invite researchers from “Low and Middle Income Countries” and “High Income Countries” to work closely together in international consortia. This interaction is to result in unusual perspectives and new partnerships from which everyone benefits. Projects in the field of “Social Inequality” have already been approved. Calls for proposals in the areas of “Cultural Heritage and Change” and “Global Medicine and Health Research” have been issued; another call concerning the field “Human Environment Interaction” is being prepared.

At the European level, cooperation and networking between research partners from different countries are also fostered. In the **“Challenges for Europe”** Initiative, the Foundation supports scholars in the humanities, social and cultural studies from at least three countries who wish to address some of the pressing problems facing Europe.

In realigning its international activities, the Foundation is committed to cooperating with other renowned international funders: Together, we are better equipped to find the most innovative ideas, attract great attention to important issues, and initiate solutions for the challenges of the future.

Current information is available on our website:

www.volkswagenstiftung.de/en/funding/our-funding-portfolio-at-a-glance

As a research partner in the international project “Climate Change Mitigation and Poverty Reduction” Kritdiyaporn Wongsra (second from left) investigated how small community projects in her home country Thailand contribute to energy security and poverty reduction.



Lessons learnt? Bangladesh and the international clothing industry

The collapse of the Rana Plaza textile factory in Bangladesh in 2013, in which more than 1,100 people died and more than 2,400 were injured, has at least partially brought about improvements in labor standards in garment supply chains. This is one of the results of the international project “Changes in the Governance of Garment Global Production Networks: Lead Firm, Supplier and Institutional Responses to the Rana Plaza Disaster”. This interdisciplinary and international research project focused on how the production and working conditions in the global garment industry have changed since the disaster. The researchers interviewed CSR and procurement managers in about 80 leading garment retailers and brands in Germany, Great Britain, Sweden, and Australia and talked to many other stakeholders in these countries. They also surveyed the

managers of 150 factories and 1,500 workers in Bangladesh.

“From the workers’ point of view, building safety and working conditions have improved, at least in the larger, export-oriented factories that are covered by the Accord on Fire and Building Safety or the Alliance for Building Safety,” says project leader Prof. Dr. Elke Schüßler. “But while retailers and brands now focus more on ensuring compliance with labor standards, they also do little to financially support factories’ remediation activities, while at the same time often decreasing purchasing prices.” Thus, it is questionable whether Rana Plaza will have led to long-term improvements in labor standards in Bangladesh, especially since the continuation of the Accord for five more years has been opposed by the Bangladeshi government.

Garment workers on their way home: In Bangladesh more than four million people work in the textile industry.



Women on the Move

Meron Zeleke Eresso devotes herself to a hitherto neglected aspect of migration research



After being funded as a Junior Fellow by the Foundation, Meron Zeleke Eresso successfully applied for a Senior Fellowship with her research project titled “Movements on Hold? A Study of Ethiopian Female Transit Migrants in Djibouti”. The Foundation’s “Knowledge for Tomorrow” Initiative has so far supported around 100 young researchers in Africa.

www.volkswagenstiftung.de/en/africa

The international project team includes researchers from the UK, Bangladesh, Australia and Sweden; lead: Prof. Dr. Elke Schüßler, Institute of Organization Science, University of Linz, Austria (previously FU Berlin).

More about the project results can be found at www.wiwiss.fu-berlin.de/forschung/Garments

The stories are touching. One woman left her newborn baby behind; another pregnant woman was held in prison for weeks. Migrant women have to put up with awful conditions in order to reach their desired destination: They want to get to the Gulf States via the transit country Djibouti so that they will be able to support their families in Ethiopia. For her research, Meron Zeleke Eresso, an anthropologist and herself a mother of three, spent several

months living with the women in Arhiba, Djibouti – on just 12 square meters per person and sleeping on mattresses on the bare floor. Being together for so long and sharing everyday problems created mutual trust and enabled deep insights into the plight of migrant women. Meron Zeleke Eresso experienced these migrant women as self-determined individuals with their own history and agenda. Her work on Ethiopian transit migrants opens up alternatives to the

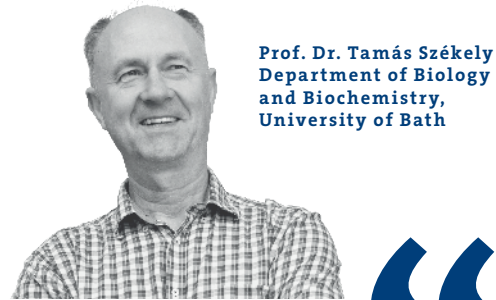
victim narrative propagated by the media and closes a gap in migration research in Africa. And with great success: She recently became an Associate Professor at the University of Addis Ababa and is now involved in a project of the “Global Issues” Initiative.

The Foundation – impressions of grantees and partners

Dr. Pauline Mwinzi
Chief Research Officer,
KMRI, Kisumu



The grant from Volkswagen Foundation was a key milestone in shaping my career and inspired me to establish a Neglected Tropical Diseases Research Unit at the Kenya Medical Research Institute. It is from this step to becoming a lead researcher in NTDs, that I came to work with others at the WHO Office for Africa to coordinate NTD control.



Prof. Dr. Tamás Székely
Department of Biology
and Biochemistry,
University of Bath

Repeated participation in the panel of experts of the Evolutionary Biology Initiative showed the high standard of applications, and we had a hard time selecting the most promising projects. An exceptional aspect, that I really appreciate, was that we had the opportunity to meet the scientists each year during their award period, and could see their research in progress: This made the panel's work enjoyable and presumably helped the grantees to excel.



Prof. Dr. Thomas Breu
Centre for Development
and Environment,
University of Bern

As a member of the Central Asia-Caucasus Initiative's review panel, I experienced how important it is for the Volkswagen Foundation to support future-oriented sustainability research – and how deeply it is committed to the idea of genuine research partnerships with developing countries. This will accelerate the necessary capacity development on sustainability issues both in the Global South and here, and drive innovation and its implementation.

The close collaboration between four independent foundations from Denmark, Germany, Italy and Sweden regarding the common call “Global Issues – Integrating different Perspectives on Social Inequality” is an excellent example of how global research cooperation can be promoted. Through this collaboration, initiated by the Volkswagen Foundation, we open doors for researchers all over the world to come together to tackle major global challenges and to broaden their research perspective. We at Novo Nordisk are pleased to be part of this commitment, which is creating new funding and research partnerships across the borders of countries and continents.



Thomas Alslev Christensen
PhD, Head of Impact,
Novo Nordisk Fonden,
Hellerup



Dr. Carolin Antos-Kuby
Assistant Professor,
Freigeist-Fellow,
University of Konstanz

I think it's great that the Foundation enables researchers to realize projects where the result is completely open and which nobody else supports. You are motivated and encouraged to embark on a path that is not the easiest.

The International Doctoral School at Ilia State University is intended to become a model for modern, structured, and effective doctoral education in Georgia. I am happy that the Foundation proves to be such a competent, reliable and supportive partner and at the same time is open to finding flexible solutions whenever this large-scale project requires it.



Dr. Martin Piazena
IDS Coordinator,
Tbilisi

Funder? Partner!



Workshop discussion at the Foundation-funded international conference on "Extreme Events".

Below: Media training for researchers at the Foundation's office.

Funding research is not all we do. In various fields the Volkswagen Foundation also provides support as a partner of its grantees and the scientific community as a whole.

- **Science communication and knowledge transfer:** The dialog with the public is becoming increasingly important – on the one hand, to show what research can achieve, but also to create transparency and to identify and address concerns. The Foundation not only provides additional funds for public relations work on research projects, but also media training for its grantees.
- **With conferences, symposia and workshops,** the Foundation offers scholars and scientists from all over the world the opportunity for networking, something which is becoming increasingly important in our globalized world. Most of these events are held in Hannover at the rebuilt Herrenhausen Palace and its modern conference center.
- The Foundation wishes to contribute to the **integration of refugee scholars** in research and society and help them to carry on their academic career in Germany. To this end, researchers who are currently grantees or were funded during the last 10 years are given the possibility to integrate refugee scholars into their research context.
- Young researchers involved in funded projects are encouraged to pursue their careers by supporting them with **further training**, e.g., in conflict management, team building or appointment negotiations.
- **Equal opportunities and the compatibility of career and family** are also important to the Foundation. With family-related benefits it supports grantees in its person-oriented funding initiatives and calls.



Six steps to your grant

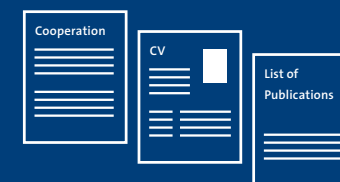
1

Search the website: Which funding offer suits your plans best?



2

Which kind of cooperation with German researchers is requested? Which information must be provided?



3

Apply via the Foundation's electronic application platform.



4

The application is pre-checked at the Foundation.



5

The review process is carried out according to funding initiative.



6

Decisions are made by the Board of Trustees and the Secretary General.



www.volkswagenstiftung.de/en