

**ALWAYS PREPARED FOR NEW  
INFECTIOUS DISEASES**

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**INSTITUTE  
OF TROPICAL  
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ANTWERP



## PORTRAIT THE MAKING OF THE MASKS

**In times of crisis, like the one presented to the world in spring of this year, people react differently. Sticking your head in the sand is one possible option, another is to panic and to start hoarding toilet paper, and then there are those who become resourceful and who get very, very busy. ITM's Ilse Maes, laboratory technician in the Unit of Molecular Parasitology, Department of Biomedical Sciences, is a shining example of the latter.**

It all started in a discussion on the rarity of protective mouth masks during the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic with her head of unit, and member of ITM's COVID-19 Committee, Jean-Claude Dujardin. From this discussion at the end of April, Ilse, an accomplished seamstress, found a good pattern, made a three-fold-fabric-with-space-for-a-filter prototype, bought 55 metres of African Wax fabric, three km of black cord and 10, 200m bobbins of black thread, enlisted the help of 24 ITM volunteer seamstresses, made a 'how to' training video for YouTube and got cracking to make sure everyone had all they needed to produce 1500 masks to help keep ITM staff safe during the pandemic.

"A local charity – 'Creatives tegen Corona', in English creative artists against corona – had provided the material for 300 white masks, so the plan was to buy the material for another 1200 so that we could make 1500 in total. This meant we could offer three masks to each 500 of our colleagues," explains Ilse. "Sewing started on 3 May, and by 20 May, we'd put together 300 packages. By 2 June all masks were done and ready for distribution to everyone," says Ilse, almost unbelievably.

Ilse's work in the laboratory, assisting masters and PhD students in their research projects, had to stop during the Belgian confinement period. She was given knowledge management tasks to start, and once her mask production and distribution 'cottage industry' began, Ilse, as so many others involved in pandemic activities, was working nights and weekends, along with caring for and home schooling her two small children.

"It was a very busy period. Luckily the mask making was something my whole family got involved in. My husband took on the task of cutting the three kilometres of black cord into 50cm lengths needed for the 4,800 mask ties. To begin, he started cutting one at a time. Then my daughter invented a machine with a building-block toy that could measure



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five cords at a time – she ended up saving her dad a lot of time!”

And this is not to mention logistics: “Along with my fellow seamstresses, a big thank you goes to the packaging team of six people who made up separate bags of three masks each for every colleague. A special thank you goes to Simon Geerts from the Unit of Safety, Health, and Environment at ITM. He did a wonderful job sourcing and ordering the packaging materials and managing logistics with me. He even came up with a sticker for each of the bags. Alongside his heart illustration, he wrote ‘Houd moed, ook dit komt vast weer goed’ – which is a Dutch rhyme for, ‘stay courageous, all will soon be OK.’”

Despite all the uncertainties this global pandemic entails, one thing is sure: ITM staff are safer (and very individual) with their masks on.

And what’s next for Ilse? “We’ve had another order of 50 masks, this time with elastic ear attachments, rather than cord ties, which will be used as gifts to people visiting the Institute. And talking of visitors, we’re proud to say the King and Queen of the Belgians visited ITM in June, and they each received one of our masks – what better way to end a difficult period!” she added with a smile.

#### Seamstresses and seamsters

- » Gertrudis De Greef
- » Isa Bogaert
- » Davy Hendriks
- » Lieselotte Cnops
- » Anita Vermeulen
- » Lieve Vermeiren
- » Marleen van Dijk
- » Raquel Inocencio Da Luz
- » Caroline Theunissen
- » Fiona Robertson
- » Anne Marie Trooskens
- » Christel Desmaretz
- » Lieve Vanherck
- » Linda Paredis
- » Louize Brants
- » Evi Pockele
- » Simon Geerts
- » Françoise Dehondt
- » Britta Campe
- » Sandra Coppens
- » Margo Wouters
- » Jolein Laumen
- » Katrien De Pauw
- » Ann Ceulemans
- » Ilse Maes

#### Packaging team

- » Karin De Ridder
- » Stéphanie Raeymaekers
- » Valerie Bastiaensen
- » Margo Wouters
- » Lieve Vermeiren
- » Simon Geerts

## THE LIST TIPS FROM ITM STAFF FOR GETTING THROUGH A LOCKDOWN

**18 March 2020. Belgium went in lockdown to halt the spread of the coronavirus. We stayed home, banned all but essential travel and generally put our**

**life on hold. How did ITM staff and students experience this challenging period? And how did they look after themselves?**

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### KEEPING IN TOUCH!

As a PhD student at ITM, Kéfilath Bello comes to Belgium only occasionally. She works as a researcher at the Centre for Research in Human Reproduction and Demography (CERRHUD) in Benin, her home country. When Belgium went in lockdown, she was suddenly stranded here for far longer than anticipated.

“When the borders closed, I felt rather upset because nobody could tell me when I would be able to return home. I ended up staying in Antwerp for four months instead of the two that I had planned. The only way I could deal with this situation was by keeping in touch with people at home.”

I was glad that I could go to the office regularly. Some of my colleagues became good friends. However, once my workday finished, I longed for my family. We talked on WhatsApp, but long calls were too expensive. Luckily, my husband and three children were doing fine.”



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