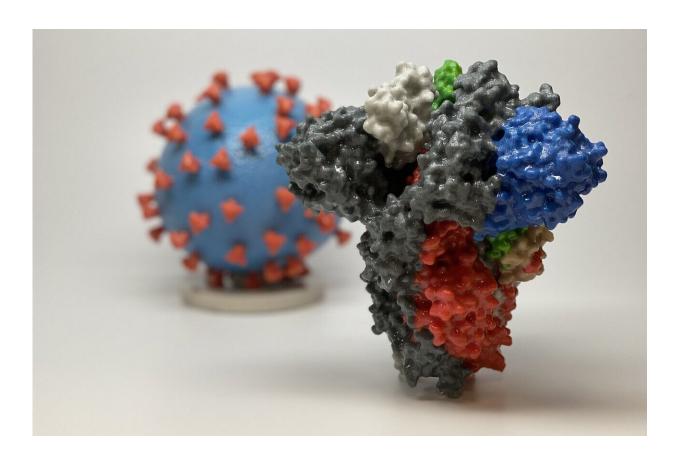# Swiss 'hackathon' seeks new paths in virus battle

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3D print of a spike protein of SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19—in front of a 3D print of a SARS-CoV-2 virus particle. The spike protein (foreground) enables the virus to enter and infect human cells. On the virus model, the virus surface (blue) is covered with spike proteins (red) that enable the virus to enter and infect human cells. Credit: NIH

More than 5,000 people took part over the weekend in a virtual "hackathon" in Switzerland to generate fresh ideas for how to deal with and combat COVID-19, organisers said Monday.

The event, backed by Swiss authorities, kicked off on Friday evening and ran through the weekend, and on Monday evening the organisers announced the 42 best projects.

A total of 4,610 people signed up and, with the support of some 500 mentors, were separated into hundreds of teams tasked with tackling more than 190 different challenges, including generating ideas on how better to protect those most vulnerable to the new coronavirus, data against fake news and the impact of quarantine on mental health.

The 48-hour event also including morning yoga sessions, online concerts and a dance party.

"It has been a mind-blowing success," Christoph Birkholz, the event's co-initiator, told AFP. "It is beyond words."

He said the event was inspired by large-scale recent hackathons in Germany, Estonia and Poland, but that the Swiss event was aimed to appeal to non-techies, who made up a majority of participants.

Among the participants was Swiss Health Minister Alain Berset, the head of the Swiss parliament along with 25 other parliamentarians, as well as representatives from a broad range of professions, including medicine, education and science.

The large numbers of people joining the event, using online tools that many were not familiar with, had posed some challenges, Birkholz said, adding, though, that it was also a great opportunity.

"Many of the participants have never used the Slack tool. Many didn't know what Zoom is. So I think that is an intended side effect, a sort of experience learning of the tools that everyone currently needs," he said.

The projects highlighted included a long line of apps, including one to help patients write their advanced health directives, a real-time tracking app of bed availability at all Swiss hospitals, and a mobile education app to help teachers keep track of their remote-learning students' progress.

But they also included more analogue projects, including a possible book project reflecting on Switzerland's post-COVID-19 future.

Each of the highlighted projects will each receive 1,000 Swiss francs ($1,020, 950 euros) in funding, with the possibility to apply for additional funding from a pool of 250,000 francs, the organisers said.

"This is not the end of a process," Birkholz said. "I hope it is just the beginning."

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