An epidemic of chronic, non-communicable diseases is growing in Africa. By 2030, according to the WHO, three of the top four causes of death in low-income countries will be heart disease, stroke, and chronic lung disease. No large scale epidemiologic studies investigating chronic diseases have been conducted in Africa.

PaCT, a component of the Global Epidemiology Initiative established at the Harvard School of Public Health, is an ambitious project which will investigate chronic, non-communicable diseases among 500,000 people from four African countries over the next 20 years. This initiative will also provide training opportunities for African researchers. PaCT includes scientists from universities in South Africa, Uganda, Tanzania, Nigeria, as well as Harvard University. Pilot studies are being conducted in all four of these countries.

An initial cross-sectional baseline survey, with 6 month longitudinal follow-up was planned. We aimed to recruit 800—1000 school teachers employed at public schools within the Cape Town metropolitan area. After returning a self-administered questionnaire and completed consent forms, teachers were visited at the schools by trained nurses who took physical measurements (weight, height, waist circumference and blood pressure) and collected biological (blood and urine) samples.

Our presentation will provide a brief overview of PaCT activities in the four African countries involved. It will then focus on practical challenges encountered in the pilot studies and how they were addressed, with special reference to the South African pilot study. These challenges include funding procurement, standardisation of methods across countries, obtaining approval for the study, participant recruitment, data collection and analysis.