



The EpiSouth Plus Project: strengthening the control of public health threats through a Mediterranean and South-East European network

Dente MG , Riccardo F, Fabiani M, Alfonsi V, Nacca G, Ranghiasi A, Meduri F, Tancredi P and Declich S on behalf of the EpiSouth Network*
Italian National Institute of Health (ISS), Rome, Italy

* ALBANIA, Tirana (Institute of Public Health); ALGERIA, Alger (National Institute of Public Health); BOSNIA & HERZEGOVINA (Ministry of Civil Affairs, Sarajevo; Ministry of Health and Social Welfare, Banja Luka, Republic of Srpska; Public Health Institute, Mostar, Federation of B&H); BULGARIA, Sofia (National Center of Infectious and Parasitic Diseases; Ministry of Health); CROATIA, Zagreb (Croatian National Institute of Public Health); CYPRUS, Nicosia (Ministry of Health); EGYPT, Cairo (Ministry Of Health and Population); FYROM–Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Skopje (Institute for Health Protection; Clinic of Infectious Diseases); FRANCE (Institute for Public Health Surveillance, Saint Maurice Cedex; Institute Pasteur, Paris); GREECE, Athens (Hellenic Center for Diseases Control and Prevention); ISRAEL (Center for Disease Control, Tel Hashomer; Ministry of Health, Jerusalem); ITALY (National Institute of Health, Rome; Teaching Hospital, Padua; National Institute for Infectious Diseases “Lazzaro Spallanzani”, Rome; Intrauniversity Consortium CINECA, Casalecchio di Reno; Local Health Unit of Turin, Turin); JORDAN, Amman (Ministry of Health); KOSOVO UNSCR 1244, Prishtina (National Institute of Public Health); LEBANON, Beirut (Ministry of Public Health); LIBYA, Tripoli (National Center for Infectious Disease Prevention and Control); MALTA, Msida (Ministry of Health, Elderly and Community Care); MECIDS Middle East Consortium on Infectious Disease Surveillance; MONTENEGRO, Podgorica (Institute of Public Health); MOROCCO, Rabat (Ministry of Health); PALESTINE, Ramallah (Ministry of Health); ROMANIA, Bucharest (Institute of Public Health); SERBIA, Belgrade (Institute of Public Health); SLOVENIA, Ljubljana (Institute for Public Health); SPAIN, Madrid (Carlos III Health Institute); SYRIA, Damascus (Ministry of Health); TUNISIA, Tunis (Ministry of Health); TURKEY, Ankara (Ministry of Health; Refik Saydam National Hygiene Centre); WHO-IHR International Health Regulations Coordination, Lyon, France

Summary

With 27 participating countries, the EpiSouth Network was the biggest inter-country collaborative effort in the Mediterranean Region. Following the successful implementation of the EpiSouth Project (2006-2010), which focussed on communicable diseases, surveillance and training, the network implemented the EpiSouth Plus Project (2010-2014) with a focus on strengthening preparedness to common health threats and bio-security risks. Thanks to the EpiSouth Plus Project, a Mediterranean Regional Laboratories Network was established, a capacity building process on preparedness to common health threats was set up, the creation of a “culture of epidemic intelligence” was supported and facilitation of IHR implementation with a special focus on coordination of surveillance between Points of Entry was promoted.

Background and Aim

Countries around the Mediterranean Sea share epidemiological characteristics and public health problems. In order to share knowledge and develop joint activities, in 2006 a Mediterranean collaborating framework, called the EpiSouth Network, was established.

The EpiSouth Network progressively expanded from including 9 EU MS to 27 countries of which 10 EU MS and 17 Non-EU MS from South Europe, the Balkans, North Africa and the Middle-East. It was therefore the biggest inter-country collaborative effort in the Mediterranean Region.

In order to increase health security in the Mediterranean Area and Balkans, it is necessary to enhance preparedness, detection and response capacity at national/regional levels to face threats to public health. The framework of the International Health Regulations (IHR) is particularly useful in this effect because it is not only legally binding for all EpiSouth partners but it also declines a set of capacities to be met, detailing a mechanism for information exchange and response collaboration under the umbrella of WHO.

Between 2010 and 2014, the network implemented the EpiSouth Plus Project with the aim to increase the health security in the Mediterranean area and South East Europe by enhancing and strengthening preparedness to common health threats and bio-security risks at national and regional levels and in the framework of the WHO-IHR.

EpiSouth Plus activities

In addition to WP1-Coordination; WP2-Dissemination; WP3-Evaluation, EpiSouth Plus activities were articulated in four WPs: WP4-Establishing a Mediterranean Regional Laboratories Network; WP5 - Promoting common procedures in Generic Preparedness and Risk Management Plans; WP6-Enhancing Mediterranean Early Warning Systems (EWS) and cross-border Epidemic Intelligence, and WP7- Facilitating IHR implementation.

Management

The Project was led by the Italian National Institute of Health (ISS) and counselled by an Advisory Board composed by EC, ECDC, WHO and other international experts. Each country participating in the EpiSouth Network was represented by two national EpiSouth Focal Points (FPs). Each FP was a public health officer working in the country’s MoH or IPH officially selected among those involved in preparedness and risk management of Communicable Diseases and other Public Health threats. Most FP were also WHO International Health Regulations (IHR) and/or EU Early Warning and Response System (EWRS) Focal Points. Participation to the Network activities was on a voluntary basis. Staff from participating countries were not paid for their contribution, however all costs related to their involvement in the Network activities were covered by the projects. Each EpiSouth Plus WP, with the exception of WP3 evaluation, was led by two co-leaders (one from an EU and one from a non-EU Country/International Organization). In order to facilitate countries’ participation and WPs activities implementation, Steering Teams (WPSTs) were established for each WP to identify the countries’ needs, develop the tools and the conducive project environment in accordance with the specific objective and requirements of the related WP. The project activities and achievements were disseminated through a multilingual website and quarterly bulletins. EpiSouth Plus underwent both an internal and external evaluation.

Results

A Mediterranean Regional Laboratories Network was established to facilitate common threat detection and build regional capacity on the diagnosis of Dengue, West Nile Viruses and on Biosecurity. This network was consolidated through trainings, site visits and an External Quality Assessment (EQA). A capacity building process on preparedness to common health threats was set up with training modules and workshops culminating in the implementation of the Nautilus Simulation Exercise and the preparation of the EPREP Tool (Emergency Preparedness Planning) aimed at supporting EpiSouth Countries in setting up their Preparedness Plans. The focus of EpiSouth Plus epidemic intelligence (EI) activities has been on sharing information, the publication of bulletins and thematic notes and residential stages on EI/Event Based Surveillance. In order to facilitate information sharing, the EpiSouth Network set up and facilitated a dedicated secure platform. Since late 2012, to ensure its sustainability after the end of EpiSouth Plus and interoperability, this secure platform is hosted and managed by the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC). In the framework of facilitating IHR implementation, EpiSouth Plus countries highlighted the need to enhance the coordination of surveillance between Points of Entry, (i.e. ports, airports and ground crossings), and the National Health Systems in the Mediterranean Region. EpiSouth Plus contributed to the development of knowledge in this area, by conducting in four countries of the Network the EpiSouth Plus National Situation Analysis on coordination of surveillance between PoE and NHS (ENSA). This study included site visits in each participating country involving both the Ministries of Health and PoEs. The EpiSouth Plus capacity building events/activities have involved more than 200 people and include two project meetings, two workshops/trainings on preparedness, two trainings on applied epidemiology, one simulation exercise, one lab training on Dengue, one lab training on WNV, EQA for Dengue and WNV, lab experts site visits, three residential stages on Early Warning and Epidemic Intelligence and four site visits carried out in the framework of the WP7 ENSA. The main final Outcomes/Deliverables have been three Strategic Documents: the EPREP Tool; Recommendations for the Institutions and consolidation of relevant lab networks and their capacity building process; and the Report on Coordination of Epidemiological Surveillance between PoE and the National Health System in the EpiSouth Region, co-authored by WHO.

Conclusions

EpiSouth-Plus was unique for its focus on the Mediterranean region as a whole, including non-UE countries and all three WHO Regional Offices that cover the Mediterranean. In addition to facilitating epidemiological communication and practical training, this regional approach strengthened solidarity and cohesion within the European Community and between EU and non-EU countries. It also enabled information sharing on cross-border public health threats and contributed to facilitating the implementation of IHR. Ultimately, EpiSouth-Plus contributed to the stability of the region as well as to improve public health protection.



The EpiSouth Network website

The EpiSouth Plus Project was co-funded by the European Union DG-SANCO/EAHC and EuropeAid together with the participating national partner Institutions. The financial support of the Italian Ministry of Health and ECDC is also acknowledged.

Starting date -duration	October 2010 - 39 months
Leader Organization	The Project is led by the Italian National Institute of Health (ISS) and counselled by an Advisory Board composed by EC, ECDC, WHO and other international experts.
Contact/WebSite	EpiSouth Dissemination Team: episouth@iss.it www.episouthnetwork.org