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

Dente MG, Ricardi F, Fabiani M, Alfonsi V, Nacco G, Ranghiasci A, Meduri F, Tancredi P and Dedich S on behalf of the EpiSouth Network

*Italian National Institute of Health (ISS), Rome, Italy*

**ABSTRACT**

The EpiSouth Plus Project 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 bi-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 not only legally binding for all EpiSouth partners but also it declines a set of capacity building modules to enhance 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 bi-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 Regional Laboratory Networks; WP7-Strategic Planning and Preparedness, and WP8-Facilitating IHR implementation.

**Management**

The Project was led by the Italian National Institute of Health (ISS) and besought 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 (WPSs) 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 multi-website and quarterly bulletins. EpiSouth Plus underwent both an internal and external evaluation.

**Conclusions**

The EpiSouth Plus Project 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.