

The EpiMed project: the Italian support to the EpiSouth Network for the control of communicable diseases in the Mediterranean and Balkans region

Infectious diseases are potential threats that have no geographical boundaries. Aside from a few for which prevention is possible due to effective vaccinations, the only tool that public health personnel can use to contain their spread is surveillance. However, in order to translate data into appropriate action, early detection of cases, dissemination of information, and a cross-border, harmonic and prompt response are crucial. The countries of the Mediterranean area have common sea borders in the remarkable ecosystem of the Mediterranean Sea and, as a result, they also share common public health problems.

The 1st of October 2006 the project EpiSouth, co-financed by EC-DGSanco, was officially started with the aim of creating a framework of collaboration on epidemiological issues in order to improve communicable diseases surveillance, communication and training among countries in the Mediterranean and the Balkans.

The project started with 9 European Union (EU) Countries (Italy, Spain, France, Bulgaria, Greece, Cyprus, Malta, Romania and Slovenia), and soon after the need of including in the network non-European Union (non-EU) Countries of the Mediterranean and the Balkans was stressed as a priority.

This priority was shared and discussed, among others, with the Italian Ministry of Health which deemed worthwhile supporting the Network and, with this aim, a specific project named **EpiMed** was envisaged and rapidly approved.

The EpiMed Project started in June 2007 with the aim of extending and valorising the EpiSouth Network mainly through the following specific strategies:

- i) **Capacity building**: making resources available for ensuring the participation of non-EU countries members to the networking activities, to the technical meetings and to the planned training modules;
- ii) **Technical support**: ensuring appropriate support for developing critical sectors vital for the expected impact of the EpiSouth project. In particular:

✓ discussion with the involved partners regarding the case definition of diseases addressed by the Network in order to consider and acknowledge possible discrepancies during the activities implementation and data collection;

✓ planning and consolidation of project's activities in the light of the new *International Health Regulations-2005(IHR)* and support to the involved countries in the fulfilment of IHR-2005's requirements.

The ambition is to involve actively almost 30 countries (European and non-European) of Mediterranean and Balkans region with the aim of establishing a Network of Public Health Institutions which will promote information and data sharing on communicable diseases and human resources capacity building, enhancing the control of communicable diseases in the very peculiar context of this region.

EpiMed works in coordination and synergy with the European Project EpiSouth, supporting all the activities foreseen by the eight Work Packages (WPs) lead by six Public Health Institutions. The main partner (ISS, Italy) has developed a framework where all the managerial aspects are being included (WP1) and the information produced by the project are being disseminated (WP2). Three vertical WPs, "Cross-border epidemic intelligence-WP6" (InVS, France), "Vaccines and migrants-WP7" (NCIPD, Bulgaria) and "Cross-border emerging zoonoses-WP8" (HCDCP, Greece) constitute the technical basis of the project.

The two horizontal Work Packages, "Network-WP4" (Padua, Italy) and "Training-WP5" (ISCIII, Spain) provide the skills, networking and capacity building in order to match the vertical Work Packages. The project is evaluated through a dedicated Work Package (WP3).

As per July 2008 the EpiMed project is ensuring the participation to the network's activities of 17 non-European countries: 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, and Public Health Institute, Mostar, Federation of B&H); CROATIA, Zagreb (Croatian National Institute of Public Health); EGYPT, Cairo (Ministry Of Health and Population); FYROM – Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Skopje (Institute for Health Protection and Clinic of Infectious Diseases); ISRAEL, (Israel Center for Disease Control Tel Hashomer and Ministry of Health Jerusalem); JORDAN, Amman (Ministry of Health); KOSOVO UNSCR 1244 (National Institute of Public Health, Prishtina); LEBANON, Beirut (Ministry of Public Health); MONTENEGRO, Podgorica (Institute of Public Health); MAROCCO, Rabat (Ministry of Health); PALESTINE, Ramallah (Ministry of Health); SERBIA, Belgrade (Institute of Public Health of Serbia); SYRIA, Damascus (Ministry of Health); TUNISIA, Tunis (Ministry of Health); TURKEY, Ankara (Ministry of Health & Refik Saydam National Hygiene Center).

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