



EpiSouth Report 8/2009

EpiSouth Project Monitoring Report (October 2006- March 2009)

Roberto Gnesotto (WP3), Giovanni Putoto (WP4), Cinzia Montagna (WP4), Cristina Borella (WP4), Maria Grazia Dente (WP1), Massimo Fabiani (WP2), Valeria Alfonsi and Silvia Declich (Project Leader) on behalf of the EpiSouth Network (*)

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(*) Focal Points of the EpiSouth Network

1. *Silvia Bino*
2. *Eduard Kakarriqi*
Institute of Public Health
Tirana, ALBANIA
3. *Boughoufalah Amel*
4. *Djohar Hannoun*
Institut National de Santé Publique
Alger, ALGERIA
5. *Rankica Bahtijarevic*
Ministry of Civil Affairs
Sarajevo
6. *Janja Bojanic*
Public Health Institute of Republika Srpska
Banja Luka, Republika Srpska
7. *Jelena Ravlija*
Ministry of Health of Federation of B & H
Mostar, Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina
BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA
8. *Mira Kojouharova*
9. *Anna Kurchatova*
10. *Nadezhda Vladimirova*
National Centre of Infectious and Parasitic Diseases
Sofia, BULGARIA
11. *Borislav Aleraj*
12. *Ira Gjenero-Margan*
Croatian National Institute of Public Health
Zagreb, CROATIA
13. *Olga Kalakouta*
14. *Chryso Gregoriadou*
15. *Avgi Hadjilouka*
Ministry of Health
Nicosia, CYPRUS
16. *Shermine AbouAlazem*
17. *Eman Ali*
Ministry of Health and Population
Cairo, EGYPT
18. *Zarko Karadzovski*
Institute for Health Protection
19. *Zvonko Milenkovic*
Clinic for Infectious Diseases
Skopje, FYROM-Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia
20. *Philippe Barboza*
21. *Fatima Ait-Belghiti*
Institut de Veille
Saint Maurice Cedex, FRANCE
22. *Rengina Vorou*
23. *Kassiani Mellou*
24. *Kassiani Gkolfinopoulou*
Hellenic Centre for Diseases Control and Prevention
Athens, GREECE
25. *Bromberg Michal*
Ministry of Health, Israel Center for Diseases Control
Tel Hashomer, ISRAEL
26. *Emilia Anis*
Ministry of Health
Jerusalem, ISRAEL
27. *Silvia Declich*
26. *Maria Grazia Dente*
29. *Massimo Fabiani*
30. *Valeria Alfonsi*
Istituto Superiore di Sanità
Rome, ITALY
31. *Giovanni Putoto*
32. *Cinzia Montagna*
33. *Roberto Gnesotto*
Azienda Ospedaliera di Padova, Regione Veneto
Padova, ITALY
34. *Raj'a Saleh Yousef Al-Haddadin*
35. *Seifeddin Saleh Faleh Hussein/Sultan Abdullah*
Ministry of Health
Amman, JORDAN
36. *Ariana Kalaveshi*
37. *Naser Ramadani*
National Institute for Public Health of Kosova
Prishtina, KOSOVO UNSCR 1244
38. *Nada Ghosn*
39. *Assaad Khoury*
Ministry of Public Health
Beirut, LEBANON
40. *Charmaine Gauci*
41. *Tanya Melillo Fenech*
42. *Jackie Maistre Melillo*
Ministry of Health
Msida, MALTA
43. *Dragan Lausevic*
44. *Vratnica Zoran*
Institute of Public Health
Podgorica, MONTENEGRO
45. *Youbi Mohammed*
46. *Rguig Ahmed*
Ministry of Health
Rabat, MOROCCO
47. *Bassam Madi*
48. *Basem Rimawi*
Public Health Central Laboratory
Ministry of Health
Ramallah, PALESTINE
49. *Adriana Pistol*
50. *Aurora Stanescu*
51. *Florin Popovici*
Institute of Public Health
Bucharest, ROMANIA
52. *Goranka Loncarevic*
53. *Danijela Simic*
Institute of Public Health of Serbia "Dr. Milan Jovanovic Batut"
Belgrade, SERBIA
54. *Nadja Koren*
55. *Alenka Kraigher*
56. *Veronika Učakar*
Institute of Public Health
Ljubljana, SLOVENIA
57. *Fernando Simon Soría*
58. *Concepcion Martin Pando*
59. *Pilar Soler Crespo*
Istituto de Salud Carlos III
Madrid, SPAIN
60. *Yaser Al-Amour*
61. *Mahmoud Karim*
Ministry of Health
Damascus, SYRIA
62. *Mondher Bejaoui*
63. *Mohamed Ben Ghorbal*
Ministère de la Santé Publique
Tunis, TUNISIA
64. *Aysegül Gozalan*
65. *Vedat Buyurgan*
Ministry of Health,
Ankara, TURKEY
66. *Germain Thinus*
EC-DGSANCO
Luxembourg, LUXEMBOURG
67. *Massimo Ciotti*
ECDC
Stockholm, SWEDEN
68. *David Mercer/Roberta Andraghetti*
WHO-EURO
Copenhagen, DENMARK
69. *John Jabbour*
WHO-EMRO
Cairo, EGYPT
70. *Pierre Nabeth*
WHO-LYO/HQ
Lyon, FRANCE
71. *MariaGrazia Pompa*
72. *Loredana Vellucci*
Ministry of Work, Health and Social Policies
Rome, ITALY

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EPISOUTH PROJECT OFFICE

Project Leader

Silvia Declich – Rome, Italy
Istituto Superiore di Sanità – National Centre for Epidemiology, Surveillance and Health Promotion
e-mail: siilvia.declich@iss.it

WP1 Leader – Coordination of the project

Maria Grazia Dente – Rome, Italy
Istituto Superiore di Sanità – National Centre for Epidemiology, Surveillance and Health Promotion
e-mail: mariagrazia.dente@iss.it

WP2 Leader – Dissemination of the project

Massimo Fabiani – Rome, Italy
Istituto Superiore di Sanità – National Centre for Epidemiology, Surveillance and Health Promotion
e-mail: massimo.fabiani@iss.it

WP3 Leader - Evaluation of the project

Roberto Gnesotto – Padua, Italy
Azienda Ospedaliera di Padova – Training and International Projects Department
e-mail: rgnesott@yahoo.com
progetti.internazionali@sanita.padova.it

WP4 Leader - Network of public health institutions

Giovanni Putoto – Padua, Italy
Azienda Ospedaliera di Padova – Training and International Projects Department
e-mail: giovanni.putoto@sanita.padova.it
progetti.internazionali@sanita.padova.it

WP5 Leader – Training in field/applied epidemiology

Fernando Simon Soria – Madrid, Spain
Instituto de Salud Carlos III – National Epidemiology Centre
e-mail: fsimon@isciii.es

WP6 Leader – Cross-border epidemic intelligence

Philippe Barboza - Saint Maurice Cedex, France
Institut de Veille Sanitaire – Department International and Tropical Diseases
e-mail: p.barboza@invs.sante.fr

WP7 Leader – Vaccine-preventable diseases and migrant populations

Mira Kojouharova - Sofia, Bulgaria
National Center of Infectious and Parasitic Diseases - Department of Epidemiology and Surveillance of Communicable Diseases
e-mail: mkojouharova@ncipd.org

WP8 Leader – Epidemiology and preparedness to cross-border emerging zoonoses

Rengina Vorou - Athens, Greece
Hellenic Center for Diseases Control and Prevention Office for Zoonoses and Foodborne Diseases
e-mail: vorou@keelpno.gr



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1. Project description

1.1 EpiSouth General Objective

The general objective of the project is to create a framework of collaboration on epidemiological issues in order to improve communicable diseases surveillance, communication and training across the countries in the area of Mediterranean and Balkans.

1.2 Specific Objectives and Areas of Activity

Several areas of activity were identified and are being developed through specific Work Packages (WP) as follows:

1 - Co-ordination of the project (WP1), with the main specific objective (SO) of guaranteeing a high quality performance of the project.

2 - Dissemination of the project (WP2), with the main SO of disseminating the information produced by EpiSouth within the participating countries and to those who need to know through an ad hoc created website and an electronic bulletin.

3 - Evaluation of the project (WP3), with the main SO of evaluating the project and its achievements in terms of milestones, deliverables, and indicators.

4 - Network of public health institutions (WP4), with the main SO of facilitating the networking process and activities among participants in order to strengthen solidarity and cohesion.

5 - Training in field/applied epidemiology (WP5), with the main SO of strengthening the early response capacity of participating countries to health threats and infectious diseases spread.

6 - Cross-border epidemic intelligence (WP6), with the main SO of establishing a common platform on epidemic intelligence where participating countries may find broad internationally as well as regionally focused information.

7 - Vaccine-preventable diseases and migrant populations (WP7), with the main SO of assessing the access to immunisation and exchanging information on cases/outbreaks of vaccine-preventable diseases of migrant populations.

8 - Epidemiology and preparedness to cross-border emerging zoonoses (WP8), with the main SO of providing a platform for the communication of human (HPH) and veterinary public health (VPH) officials, describing risk assessment methods and providing a mechanism for exchanging information between HPH and VPH.

1.3 Methods

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.

The two horizontal Work Packages, "Networking-WP4" (Padua, Italy) and "Training-WP5" (ISCIII, Spain) provide tools that help fulfilling the objectives of the vertical Work Packages. The project is evaluated through a dedicated Work Package (WP3).

1.4 Project Network Organisation

Once the project had been approved by EC-DG SANCO, the effort done by the EpiSouth Project Steering Committee was to verify the strategic possibility to involve in the Project all the interested countries of Mediterranean area.

In this framework, the 1st Project Meeting was organised in Rome in March 2007. In addition to the 9 Countries which were involved in the project from the beginning, 13 countries from the Balkans, North Africa and Middle East participated in the meeting together with representatives of EU DG SANCO, EU ECDC, and WHO. Once the EpiSouth project objectives and methodology were discussed, the new organization and partnership were elaborated.

The 3rd Project Meeting took place in Sofia on 30th – 31st March and 1st April 2009 and, in addition to the Countries that attended the 2nd Meeting in Athens in December 2007, Libya was invited as potential partner of EpiSouth Network.

The Project Steering Committee is now composed by the 6 WP leaders Countries plus ECDC, EC-SANCO C3, WHO EURO, WHO EMRO and WHO LYO-HQ representatives as observers, in order

to facilitate synergies and avoid overlapping. In addition Focal Points from non-EU countries such as Algeria, Tunisia, Lebanon and Albania were invited as observers as well.

The participation of the Countries and the International Organisations to the project foresees three different levels of active involvement:

a) Focal Points (FPs) of the Episouth Network (WP4). Each Country/International Organisation identifies and appoints one or two relevant persons acting as Focal Point (FP) of the Episouth Network and conveying all the communication/information to the relevant officers in their respective Countries/Organisations.

b) Collaboration in the Work Packages Steering Teams (WPSTs). In order to facilitate and enhance the work, each Country/International Organisation actively collaborates in one or two WP Steering Teams, which is in charge of identifying the countries' needs, developing the tools and the conducive project environment in accordance with the specific objective and requirements of the related WP.

c) Participation to the Work Packages activities. Each participating country takes part in the activities of one up to all the WPs in accordance with their needs and interests. The involvement in the activities of the WPs that are not chosen can be requested by the country in the coming years.

As per March 2009, the Network counts 26 Countries, which have identified and appointed a total of 65 Country Focal Points (30 from EU-Countries and 35 from non-EU Countries) plus 5 representatives from International Organisations and 2 representatives from the Italian Ministry of Work, Health and Social Policies as part of the Network.

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Annex 1

Questions and Answers of the telephone interviews and questionnaires

1. Objectives and instruments

The Grant Agreement Annex I specifies completion and acceptance criteria to evaluate the project. The first ones comprise:

- Deliverables on time and compliant to what was foreseen initially,
- Respect of deadlines by all partners,
- Results measurable and satisfying.

The same Annex I also spells out the mandate of the evaluation package in the following terms:

“To evaluate the project in terms of:

1. Respect of scheduled milestones and deliverables according to the project WPs,
2. Achievement of the stated project indicators, both for quantitative and qualitative aspects;
3. Active participation of both associated and collaborating countries in the project activities” (participating countries after the 1st EpiSouth Meeting in Rome).

The EpiSouth Evaluation plan (available in EpiSouth ENWA since last July 2008) has identified several monitoring activities and tools in order to systematically assess key operations and processes of the project with the aim to contribute to its success. Monitoring has focused its attention on the two following issues: Network building and effort produced by vertical packages, because these topics are considered fundamental to EpiSouth progress. Monitoring has thus tried to answer two specific questions: 1) how far is the project contributing to resources and information sharing among the Network's members?, and 2) to what extent are vertical WP's delivering their products and achieving their objectives?

In order to investigate such areas, several tools have been designed and submitted to various stakeholders, specifically:

- *Meeting Evaluation Tool*, a questionnaire distributed to all participants at the end of the general meetings in Rome, Athens and Sofia;
- *Network Development Monitoring Tool*, a questionnaire distributed to all participants of the general meetings;
- *Overall project and horizontal packages (WP1 to WP5) Monitoring Tool*, a questionnaires concerning project's management compiled on line by the focal points;
- *Vertical packages (WP6, 7 and 8) Monitoring Tool*, a questionnaire concerning vertical packages, compiled on line by the focal points;
- Set of questions about project's key aspects (Communication and Networking, Project Organisation, Project WPs relevance and future priority fields and activities) submitted to all focal points;
- Telephone interviews investigating more in depth the same above mentioned aspects with a group of focal points;
- Monitoring Sheets, sent to all WP leaders.

EpiSouth Meeting Evaluation Tool investigates what participants think and feel about general meetings organization, management and results. This document includes the Sofia meeting report; the previous ones are available from the ENWA project's website.

EpiSouth Network Development Monitoring Tool looks at issues such as participants understanding of project's goals and perception of membership, i.e. communication openness, group cohesion, collaborative relationships, trust, involvement, participation, consensus and commitment among partners. As for the previous tool, the two reports

analysing and interpreting the data collected in Rome and Athens are available on the public area of project's website

https://www.episouth.org/outputs/wp3/2nd_Monitoring_of_EpiSouth_Network_Development_ATHENS.pdf,

whereas the most recent is included here.

Two questionnaires concerning project's WP from management to subject matters were compiled on line by the focal points (FPs) and a set of questions about project's key aspects was also submitted to all FPs. Telephone interviews investigating more in depth the same above mentioned aspects were carried out with a convenience sample of FPs.

Finally, the Monitoring Sheets allowed to determine progress for management and vertical packages. In order to monitor the degree of completion of activities that each partner institution has the responsibility to carry out, WP3, in collaboration with the other management packages (WP1, 2 and 4), has drawn up forms which allow to compare what was planned with what was completed by each WP.

The following section go over the main points emerged from all the above mentioned tools, except the last one because the information collected through such instrument has been included in the 1st and 2nd interim technical implementation reports.

This Monitoring Report also briefly looks at the web-site utilization and the evolution of the Network. In accordance with the mandate of WP3, this document does not cover completed activities and financial aspects.

2. The EpiSouth Network Development questionnaires

During the Third EpiSouth Meeting held in Sofia, a questionnaire investigating key aspects of Network development was distributed among the participants. This tool was also filled out during the two prior general meetings allowing a regular monitor of its advancement.

31 participants (out of 60 (52%), 57% and 37% in Athens and Rome respectively) completed the questionnaire but not every question was answered by all. The analysis does distinguish between different professional background or geographical areas, because many respondents did not identify themselves nor specified the region where they come from.

The following comments first draw attention to each question; finally the conclusion attempts a general interpretation of the answers and suggests steps useful for the Network's development. The text and numbers in *italics* (e.g. 5) refer to the questions, whereas integers in bold (e.g. **5**) indicate number of responses to each category (13 answered "I'm clear" to the first question).

Questionnaire

1. Network's purpose

1: *I'm uncertain*

2: **1** (3%)

3: **3** (10%)

4: **11** (35%)

5: *I'm clear* **16** (52%)

87% of respondents (85 in Athens and 86% in Rome) have a clear understanding of the Network's purpose. Only one (3%) still has some doubts, probably a newcomer.

2. Network's goals

- 1: *Set from above* **0** (0%)
- 2: **0** (0%)
- 3: **6** (19%)
- 4: **14** (45%)
- 5: *Emerged through interaction* **11** (35%)

Similarly to Athens (83%), the great majority of respondents 81% (a clear improvement compared to the project's beginning in Rome 68%) think that EpiSouth's goals were set in a participatory fashion. 19% feels that such goals are the result of a mix of interaction and up-bottom approaches. Nobody believes that goals were imposed on participants.

3. Network's membership

- 1: *I'm out* **3** (10%)
- 2: **1** (3%)
- 3: **3** (10%)
- 4: **11** (37%)
- 5: *I'm in* **12** (40%)

77% of respondents (83 in Rome and 72% in Athens) are convinced they are full members of the Network. Still 13% feel they do not belong.

4. Communication

- 1: *Very cautious* **0** (0%)
- 2: **0** (0%)
- 3: **9** (29%)
- 4: **13** 42%)
- 5: *Very open* **8** (26%)

68% (56 and 75% in the previous meetings) of respondents feel that communication is direct, frank, no one perceives it as circumspect.

5. Mechanisms for getting feedback

- 1: *Poor* **0** (0%)
- 2: **3** (10%)
- 3: **11** (35%)
- 4: **9** (29%)
- 5: *Excellent* **8** (26%)

55% (77 and 82% in the previous meetings) think that feedback procedures are working properly. This is one of the few topics investigated where the score was worse compared to previous meetings. Possibly the increasing number of participants including professionals new to EpiSouth and representing diverse institutions and the fact that the meeting focused much on the future explain this finding.

6. Useful feedback

- 1: *Very little* **0** (0%)
- 2: **3** (10%)

- 3: **7** (23%)
- 4: **13** (42%)
- 5: *Considerable* **8** (26%)

68% (65 and 84% *in the previous meetings*) are convinced that feedback is helpful.

7. Use of Network member's skills

- 1: *Poor use* **0** (0%)
- 2: **3** (10%)
- 3: **7** (23%)
- 4: **14** (47%)
- 5: *Good use* **6** (20%)

67% (70 and 68% *in the previous meetings*) believe that involvement in the Network makes use of their capacities. 10% feel rather alienated in terms of skills utilization.

8. Support

- 1: *Little help for individuals* **0** (0%)
- 2: **1** (3%)
- 3: **10** (34%)
- 4: **13** (45%)
- 5: *Strong support for individuals* **5** (17%)

62% (83 and 55% *in the previous meetings*) think that the project's atmosphere provides significant help to members

9. Working on relationships with others

- 1: *Little effort* **0** (0%)
- 2: **1** (3%)
- 3: **10** (32%)
- 4: **14** (45%)
- 5: *High level of effort* **6** (20%)

65% (70 and 80% *in the previous meetings*) feel that the relationship dimension is carefully dealt with by participants.

10. Cohesion

- 1: *Low* **0** (0%)
- 2: **2** (7%)
- 3: **9** (30%)
- 4: **16** (53%)
- 5: *Optimal* **3** (10%)

63% (52 and 78% *in the previous meetings*) of respondents feel that cohesion is solid. 7% perceive some difficulty in this regard.

11. Conflict

- 1: *Difficult issues are avoided* **0** (0%)

- 2: **1** (3%)
- 3: **8** (26%)
- 4: **10** (32%)
- 5: *Problems are discussed openly and constructively* **12** (39%)

71% (68 and 65% *in the previous meetings*) are convinced that disagreements are tackled overtly and effectively.

12. Influence on decisions

- 1: *By few members* **1** (3%)
- 2: **5** (16%)
- 3: **9** (29%)
- 4: **8** (26%)
- 5: *By all members* **8** (26%)

In the same way recorded during prior meetings, just above half (52%) think that all members have significant control over decisions. 19% (9 and 18%) are still convinced that power within the Network belongs to a limited group.

13. Distribution of leadership

- 1: *Limited* **0** (0%)
- 2: **6** (19%)
- 3: **11** (35%)
- 4: **5** (16%)
- 5: *Shared* **9** (29%)

45% (65 and 61% *in the previous meetings*) believe that leadership' distribution is balanced among members.

14. Capacity for creativity and growth

- 1: *Low* **0** (0%)
- 2: **0** (0%)
- 3: **8** (26%)
- 4: **11** (35%)
- 5: *High* **12** (39%)

74% (70 and 80% *in the previous meetings*) see big chances for ingenuity and advancement within the Network.

15. Risk taking

- 1: *Not encouraged* **1** (4%)
- 2: **1** (4%)
- 3: **9** (31%)
- 4: **12** (43%)
- 5: *Encouraged and supported* **5** (18%)

61% (39 and 54% *in the previous meetings*) feel that risk taking is promoted. Participants think that their autonomy in exploring solutions to problems is expanding compared to earlier phases.

Participants also offered some comments, which are similar to those already brought up during the telephone interviews and the small groups discussion in Sofia:

- Care should be taken to dedicate enough time to: - Communicate = 50% of the job; - discussion (a bit too little time during plenary session).
- There is collaboration between countries from 4 district regions; it needs to be continued and strengthened as traditions have been laid already and element of trust already exist. Need more commitment in certain WPs. More involvement of non-EU countries.
- I wish success and progress.
- To continue Network communications with feedback information.
- The Network and the project have been built well and now it is necessary to continued, to produce more: let us support Mediterranean Public Health.
- The commitment of all parties must to be accurate in order to improve them more, and by offering technical support from EU countries to non-developed countries.
- It is necessary to involve higher authorities clarifying to the FPs rules and set of regulations supporting FPs work.
- EpiSouth Network should be institutionalised. That is its conversion from a project (regardless the time span) to an institution with close collaboration with WHO (Copenhagen and Geneva also) and ECDC as well (though the latter is limited to the EU countries only). This way, EpiSouth institution would collaborate with WHO and ECDC, instead of competing, in the important field of communicable (infections) diseases.

Conclusions

On the whole, answers of EpiSouth's members to the questionnaire are positive and sceptical responses are rare. More specifically, comprehension of the Network's purpose is excellent, most participants believe that goals were not imposed by a sub-group, their membership is established and communication is sufficiently forthright. Nevertheless just more than half of the participants consider appropriate the tools for feedback within the project and distribution of influence on decisions. Roughly two thirds of participants feel that their capacities are put to use through their involvement in the project, the project provides a mutually supportive climate and respectful relationships, conflict management is open and constructive and their autonomy in exploring solutions to problems is expanding compared to earlier phases. These features represent a firm base from which it will be possible to move further before the closing stage and, hopefully, during a new version of the project.

3. WP1-WP5 & WP6-WP8 on-line questionnaires

With the aim to monitor EpiSouth management and activities carried out around subject matter, two questionnaires were designed and uploaded in the project web site to allow on line compilation to the project Focal Points (FPs).

The first set of questions, regarding project's management (WP1-5), was developed during the summer '08 and got a response rate of 43%. Representatives from 15 countries out of the 26 involved filled out the questionnaire.

The second questionnaire, concerning vertical packages, was forwarded during the winter '09; the response rate was 31% including FPs from 11 nations out of 26.

This report briefly analyzes the replies looking first at vertical and then horizontal work package, showing the scores (e.g. 3.9 for the first statement) and offering a short

comment. For both instruments, a 5-points Likert scale was used, from completely disagree to completely agree. Maximum score was 5 vs. a minimum of 1.

The first questionnaire investigated several topics structured under the following headings: communication, coordinated responses, common policies, overall progress, project management and overall added value.

COMMUNICATION

1. The Network is improving exchange of information regarding Communicable Diseases among participating countries in the area where I work (i.e. Balkans, Middle East, Northern Africa, Southern Europe) (3.9)

2. The Network is improving exchange of information regarding Communicable Diseases among most EpiSouth participating countries (3.9)

Participants consider EpiSouth contribution to communication as positive both within their region and on the overall. Sharing information represents a precondition for common action and is also a fundamental feature of a Network.

COORDINATED RESPONSES

3. The Network is improving coordinated responses to Communicable Diseases threats in the area where I work (i.e. Balkans, Middle East, Northern Africa, Southern Europe) (3.2)

4. The Network is improving coordinated responses to Communicable Diseases threats in most of the Mediterranean area (3.2)

Not unexpectedly the lowest scores (3.2) concern the Network contribution toward improving coordinated responses to Communicable Diseases threats in the involved areas and in most of the Mediterranean area. At present, harmonized activities in the field of Communicable Diseases control can only represent an ideal and distant goal for the Mediterranean area. Nevertheless such scores are encouraging and presumably show that participants think the project has the potential to get to that crucial point.

COMMON POLICIES

5. The Network is improving awareness about the need for common policies, strategies and programs regarding Communicable Diseases Surveillance and Control in the area where I work (i.e. Balkans, Middle East, Northern Africa, Southern Europe) (4.3)

6. The Network is improving awareness about the need for common policies, strategies and programs regarding Communicable Diseases Surveillance and Control in most of the Mediterranean area (4.3)

Answers reveal that EpiSouth has been successful in raising understanding about the importance of harmonization of strategic approaches to infectious diseases surveillance and control not only among neighbouring nations but in the whole region.

OVERALL PROGRESS

7. My institution's participation to EpiSouth contributes to improvements in the Communicable Diseases Surveillance System of my country (3.4)

8. *The Network represents a substantial progress in Communicable Diseases Surveillance in most of the Mediterranean area (3.5)*

9. *The Network contributes towards building reliable and collaborative relationships among public health professionals in most of the Mediterranean area (4.6)*

The last score show that the project is doing very well in *building reliable and collaborative relationships among public health professionals in most of the Mediterranean area*. This is an extremely important achievement because it represents EpiSouth' reason of being. It is OK that Surveillance Systems' improvement within countries is considered positive but not excellent because this was not one of EpiSouth's deliberate aim.

PROJECT MANAGEMENT

10. *The project is managed in an effective and transparent way respectful of all participant individuals and institutions (WP1) (4.7)*

11. *The website and the electronic bulletin represent effective communication tools for EpiSouth partners and beyond (WP2) (4.3)*

12. *The monitoring and evaluation activities help in maintaining EpiSouth on track in terms of quality and timeliness (WP3) (4.2)*

13. *The networking activities help the establishment and development of contacts among participating institutions (WP4) (4.3)*

14. *The training activities are relevant to the needs of participating countries and delivered with high quality (WP5) (4.6)*

These scores point out that members think project management is valuable and trustworthy, which is a prerequisite for its implementation, and that other cross-sectional positively contribute to its performance.

OVERALL ADDED VALUE

15. *My institution's involvement in the EpiSouth Network building is a worthwhile effort (4.6)*

16. *The EpiSouth Network building is a worthwhile effort for my country (4.4)*

Participants are convinced that being part of EpiSouth represents an important opportunity especially for the organization they work and, more in general, for their nation.

The second questionnaire concerned critical aspects of each technical packages; statements and relative scores are as follows.

TRAINING (WP5)

Training activities are relevant to the needs of participating countries and delivered with high quality (4,6)

EPIDEMIC INTELLIGENCE (WP6)

Assessment of epidemic intelligence in EpiSouth countries is an opportunity to improve their systems (3,9)

E-web bulletin enhances and qualifies info sharing (4,3)

WP6 members area has better work' efficiency not clear (4,3)

The Strategic document on cross-border epidemic intelligence will greatly contribute to surveillance systems integration (4,3)

IMMUNIZATION OF MIGRANT POPULATIONS (WP7)

Report on WP7 questionnaire will contribute to clarify the problem of access to vaccination by migrants (4.4)

WP7 work is facilitating the establishment of an informal network of experts involved in VPDs (4)

WP7 members area has facilitated work' efficiency (3.8)

The Strategic document on VPDs will greatly contribute to integration of policies and programs about access to vaccination by migrants (4.3)

ZOONOSIS (WP8)

WP8 members area has facilitated work' efficiency (4)

Zoonosis selection questionnaire has been a useful and appropriate tool to identify priorities (4)

Directory of HPH and VPH will represent a useful tool for communication (4)

The Strategic documents on risk assessment methods for cross-border transmission of zoonosis will greatly contribute to integration of strategies and coordinated responses (4.2)

WP6, 7 and 8 Steering Teams are facilitating collaboration among countries, enhancing views sharing, ensuring sharable tools and outcomes WP6 (4.3), WP7 (4.7), WP8 (4.2).

Among technical work packages, training gets the highest score, though statements concerning different packages are not strictly comparable and possibly statistically equivalent. All examined dimensions within each WPs appear to respond satisfactorily to members' expectations.

Some respondents also offered a few comments which follow. With the exception of the first two, which concern the questionnaire, all others are supportive of this initiative or raise similar issues put forward during the interviews and by the other investigation instruments used by EpiSouth.

- 1) Delicate to answer to all question as it is difficult to evaluate the progress of the project at this stage (1 year and half only).
- 2) Questions 3&4 are not relevant to project activities performed up to now. No coordinated responses to Communicable Diseases threats have been undertaken; therefore it is not possible to evaluate the improvement.
- 3) (It is necessary to establish) coordination with other international partners to avoid misunderstanding and overlapping and also to strengthen each others to achieve the common, shared objectives.
- 4) My opinion is that the Network is very useful, on improving surveillance system and epidemiological response in each country, and collaboration and exchange of information and experiences between EpiSouth countries. We hope for future collaboration and sustainability of the EpiSouth Project.
- 5) The idea and notion of EpiSouth with all its packages is a noble idea but needs commitment from all member states to pursue more collaboration and cooperation. In Palestine we haven't yet reap out the importance of this project because of the delay in registration and because of political instability at our country but looking forward for more collaboration.
- 6) The Network progress is already evident, as the countries are gradually informed about the needs regarding communicable diseases monitoring and timely public health interventions.
- 7) The willingness of countries to participate as well as the interest of individuals to enter the Network, prove the increased visibility of the Network.

- 8) The repeated presentations describing the EpiSouth Network and scope, in multiple regional and international Public Health meetings highlight the international interest in the EpiSouth Targets.
- 9) The strategic document on risk assessment methods for cross border transmission of zoonoses is a very important document which will contribute to a better integration of surveillance strategies and coordinated response across participating countries. WP 8 Steering Team is important and key factor for collaboration with ECDC and Ministries of health in other countries in European region (outside EpiSouth area in Europe) and other regions in EpiSouth area.
- 10) All EpiSouth members must be committed to be proactive in tracing zoonotic diseases.
- 11) WP8 must advocate for providing technical and logistic support for Member States who are having such difficulties with special focus on agrarian societies.
- 12) Some problem and selected agent (e.g. CCHF is problem for Turkey) can be integrated into WP8 studies because of support knowledge for some issues, for example the vaccine production is important for CCHF.
- 13) We expect to see an enhanced cooperation and networking as well as means of direct communication between HPH and VPH of different countries especially regarding dissemination of information (possibly in the form of forums). The participation of EU neighbouring countries is of great importance and we should find ways to keep the interest or enhance it. We feel that introducing new areas that are not already covered by EU activities is very important to enhance all participants interest.

4. Individual telephone interviews and questionnaire submitted to Focal Points

Network construction and development is EpiSouth primary goal and also a pre-requisite to the accomplishment of vertical packages objectives. The Sofia Conference represented an important step for the project because it was the last general meeting before its concluding convention. That meeting was also an opportunity to collect information on how the EpiSouth Network has evolved so far and how it could grow in the future. It was a chance to reveal challenges, opportunities and options for further progress directly through the voices of participants.

In order to identify key topics to be discussed more in depth during the Sofia meeting and better direct the attention of the group discussion on issues critical to the project success, a questionnaire was sent to all focal points and a convenience sample of EpiSouth focal points working for national institutions were individually interviewed by phone during the months of February-March 2009.

The questionnaire and the telephone interviews covered topics related to network building, its results so far, and future perspectives. More specifically, topics relevant to Network development included:

- trust, cohesion and actual collaboration among participants,
- exchange of data, information and knowledge,
- strengthening of each other,
- development of solutions to common problems.

Although the time span of the EpiSouth project is necessarily constrained by administrative rules, it is important that EU Commission executives providing political and financial support, project managers, and members maintain a long term horizon and share a vision. Therefore the questionnaire and the individual interviews also explored the future of EpiSouth. The topics covered by the two instruments (interviews and questionnaires) were

similar. 24/56 (43%) eligible FPs from 21 countries (6 EU and 15 non-EU) either replied to the questionnaire or were interviewed.

The opinions and ideas collected through this exercise were presented to the Sophia meeting's participants with two aims: first to provide a feed back on what members think and second to offer food for thought to the small groups meetings. Further, the collected information contributes to monitor the project's performance and also design a future shared vision.

Details about Questions and Answers of the telephone interviews and questionnaires are available in the Annex

The professionals interviewed work in the three vertical WPs, and are based in extra-European regions, i.e. North Africa, Middle East and Balkans. Exclusion criteria were:

- participants working for institutions acting as WP leaders,
- participants from international agencies.

Latter criteria were chosen in order to avoid biased answers from EpiSouth members who are either in a rather dominant position as persons in charge of WP or play a role outside national institutions.

The sample of Focal Points (FPs) selected for the telephone interviews included the following countries and regions:

- North Africa: Algeria and Morocco
- Middle-East: Egypt, Israel and Jordan
- Balkans: Kosovo, Macedonia and Serbia
- non WP leader and candidate countries: Romania and Turkey

Given that Macedonia and Serbia FPs were not available, Croatia was selected.

The interviews included open questions and lasted approximately half an hour. The interviews were carried out in English by R. Gnesotto and in French by C. Montagna.

Ten FPs from the following nine countries were interviewed: Israel, (2FPs), Kosovo, Morocco, Romania, Egypt, Algeria, Turkey, Croatia and Jordan.

As far as the questionnaire is concerned, a list of six questions was sent to all FPs.

Twelve FPs from ten countries filled in the questionnaire: Palestine, Jordan, Cyprus, Tunisia, Slovenia, Turkey, Greece, Serbia, Syria and Romania.

In conclusion, the answers reveal that the EpiSouth Network responds to expectations of most members. In terms of process, trusting and helpful working relationships have been established but personal contacts should be formalized, i.e. institutionalized.

As far as content is concerned, successes were acknowledged for all vertical WPs, but sometimes they lacked focus on specific problems and solutions. Participants' effort should therefore be led toward subject matters, offering concrete solutions relevant to countries, sometimes organized through regional task forces with clear mandates and ample autonomy. At the same time, guidelines concerning analysis, systems and strategies should be devised and help with implementation should be provided. All the above should be supported through ad hoc training (e-learning) and on site visits.

Concerning project management, it is deemed valid by participants, even if there are still some inevitable tension between organizations who launched the initiative and control the budget and those who do not. Feasible ways to involve more deeply non-EU participants in key decisions should be adopted (change roles from information to consultation to authority).

5. Analysis of the web site utilization

A simple analysis of the website utilization provides valuable clues about the Network's evolution. The number of accesses, defined as unique visitors, grew from 1.856 to 3.200 for the quarters from December 2007 – February 2008 to December 2008 – February 2009. During the same period, the number of unique visits increased from 3.363 to 4.730 and pages visited from 30.290 to 44.373. Web privacy policies make recognition of countries of origin impossible to identify for many contacts.

6. Conclusion

EpiSouth is two thirds through its implementation phase. The number of countries and institutions which have joined the Network is larger than anticipated, which represents a great success but also brings greater complexity. The answers to the several monitoring tools repeatedly filled out by participants converge in revealing that the EpiSouth Network has become stronger, answering to expectations of most members, and is managed effectively showing as well consideration toward participant individuals and organizations.

Annex

Questions and Answers of the telephone interviews and questionnaires

The set of questions for the telephone interviews was designed as follows:

Dear Dr

Thank you for agreeing to answer some questions about EpiSouth. The questions cover a wide range of issues, and we would like to know both your opinions and your suggestions on how to improve the performance of important dimensions of the project.

1. Which expectations did you have when your organization joined EpiSouth?
2. How far has EpiSouth fulfilled those expectations?
3. How far has EpiSouth contributed to raising awareness about the possibility of improving policies and practices regarding infectious diseases surveillance and control in your country? Do you have suggestions to improve these aspects?
4. How far has EpiSouth contributed to better sharing of data and knowledge across organizations in different nations?
5. Do you think the means and frequency of communication used by EpiSouth members are adequate for information sharing and learning? How would you describe the EpiSouth working relationship between non-European and European organizations and individuals?
6. Do you believe that EpiSouth is contributing toward or has the potential to play a role in the development of solutions to common problems in the field of infectious diseases epidemiology and control and, specifically training, epidemic intelligence, zoonosis, vaccine preventable diseases and migrants?
7. Do you think that the current project organization (Steering Committee, WP leaders, Focal Points, Steering Teams) is adequate to support the activities of the Network?
8. Do you think that the EpiSouth platform is of value for your work (user-friendly, good quantity and quality of relevant information, good interaction with other Network participants)?
9. How do you see the long term future of EpiSouth, let's say in ten years time? Ideally, how would you like the Network to evolve with respect to: training, epidemic intelligence, zoonosis, vaccine preventable diseases and migrants?
10. Would you like to add anything you feel would be important to discuss together with other EpiSouth colleagues during group interviews at the Sofia Conference?

Once again, thank you for sharing your ideas and spending time with us. We think your help will contribute to make EpiSouth a more valuable and successful project.

The questionnaire was composed by the following questions:

1. How far has EpiSouth contributed to better sharing of data and knowledge across organizations in different nations? Do you have any suggestions to improve this aspect?
2. Do you believe that EpiSouth is contributing toward or has the potential to play a role in the development of solutions to common problems in the field of infectious diseases epidemiology and control and, specifically training, epidemic intelligence, zoonosis, vaccine preventable diseases and migrants? Do you have any suggestions to improve this aspect?
3. Do you think that the current project organization (Steering Committee, WP leaders, Focal Points, Steering Teams) is adequate to support the activities of the Network? Do you have any suggestions to improve this aspect?
4. How would you describe the EpiSouth working relationship between non-European and European organizations and individuals? Do you have any suggestions to improve this aspect?
5. Do you think the means and frequency of communication used by EpiSouth members are adequate for information sharing and learning? Is the EpiSouth platform of value for your work (user-friendly, good quantity and quality of relevant information, good interaction with other Network participants)? Do you have any suggestions to improve this aspect?
6. How do you see the long term future of EpiSouth, let's say in five years time? Ideally, how would you like the Network to evolve with respect to: training, epidemic intelligence, zoonosis, vaccine preventable diseases and migrants and other topics you consider important?

The following paragraphs summarize key themes addressed by the interviews and the questionnaires using bullet points under specific topics. **Positive aspects are highlighted in blue, problematic dimensions in red and suggestions for improvement in green.**

Expectations from joining EpiSouth

- To improve communication and cooperation with other institutions and epidemiologists
- To overcome difficulties in reaching migrant communities (gipsies) with immunization programs
- To have a better overall understanding of communicable diseases epidemiology in the region (area), to learn about and compare different strategies of analysis and control
- To create contacts for future collaboration
- Unclear; hope for relevance

Responsiveness

- Expectations completely fulfilled
- It is a good start; we are in the middle of our journey and have a lot more to accomplish
- Allowed to establish professional contacts

Sharing data and knowledge

- Improved communication on communicable diseases events with other countries, especially within same region
- Created communication channels indispensable when solutions to common problems are considered
- Improved knowledge about other nations' organizations and approaches to analysis and control
- Advanced coordination within and among MoH's and other institutions
- Raised awareness about differences in populations needs and health systems and the necessity to reduce variation

- Countries have different experiences and expertise in this area and this makes sharing data more difficult
- Possible duplications between EpiSouth Bulletin and ECDC
- Too much reliance on Bulletin in its recent format cannot guarantee that the information is always relevant, timely and an opportunity for learning

- Prioritize a set of diseases according to their frequency and severity; study and compare how data are collected in different countries
- Develop early warning systems at regional level
- Add to the Bulletin weekly or monthly pages on selected infectious diseases epidemiology in all EpiSouth countries
- Link Web site with other networks

Contribution to solutions

- Contributed significantly to charting needs and problems, e.g. survey on vaccination and migrant populations can become a source for identification of common areas for further collaboration
- Improved coordination within and among MoH's and other institutions
- Raised awareness about differences in populations needs and health systems and the necessity to reduce variation

- No detailed discussion on how to improve surveillance
- No strengthening of preparedness to face a disaster or a large outbreak
- Exchange of information through the EI Bulletin is positive, but in general the exchange is insufficient
- Sharing of data among organizations is not so developed as at individual level. There is a "technical" level which is more involved than the "political" one
- The weak point is the implementation of the specific issues

- Offer more frequent and specific training on implementation of prevention programs and national plans, possibly dedicated to provincial teams
- Organize more frequent and specific meetings on technical issues: eg zoonotic diseases, surveillance systems, legislation in various countries
- Ensure exchange of different experiences with examples of good practices
- Establish formal coordination between Ministries of Health
- Adopt E-learning
- Offer technical assistance from strategic planning to intervention

- Organize visits to exchange experiences after identifying specific needs
- Establish rapid response team at regional or EPSOUTH levels
- Promote direct communication between HPH and VPH of different countries
- Advocate for financial aid in favor of people living in unstable environments like migrants

Means and frequency of communication

- Platform well designed and useful, not used enough by us
- Platform really user-friendly and surely has potential of facilitating a great deal the interaction
- Good frequency of communication
- No feedback about results of questionnaires
- The summation of evaluation activities is not disseminated to all members or probably I have missed it
- e-mails are the most frequently used mean of communication, whereas the discussion forums' potential are not used as much as it could
- Networking so far has been by exchange of knowledge and experience through a central point (WP leader) and in response to specific stimuli (reply to questionnaires mainly). Only EpiSouth meetings have been the point for actual exchange of information and knowledge
- Exchange is difficult in big meetings
- Promote multiple channels of communication such as forums and meetings bringing together a subset of countries
- Ensure that focal points communicate with each other at least twice a month using the web site
- Create specific channels for epidemic alerts
- Prioritize a set of diseases according to their frequency and severity; study and compare how data are collected in different countries
- Provide regular updates of what each working group is doing instead of waiting for the annual meeting

Working relationships between non-European and European members

- EpiSouth pays attention to the non-EU countries; e.g. very good training in Spain was attended by two Turkish people
- Visits to other countries are helpful allowing intense dialogue and learning about other realities
- At the beginning it was a bit conservative, but now we can even communicate personally on specific issues
- Trust has started to take place
- Members feel close more and more through continual communication and participation at meetings; mutual understanding and willingness to help have reinforced relationships and built friendship
- Relationships are very good; we are in a process of forming or building a unique organizational culture for EpiSouth countries
- It is not a problem of persons, but a matter of organization, because the relationship among individuals is OK
- Non-EU countries' attitude is rather passive as if they were waiting for some signal from EU nations before taking action

- A very delicate issue, there should be no first and second class countries
- Working relationship between non European and European organizations and individuals is a little limited because some political, economic, cultural and ethnic reasons
- Non-EU countries are not involved as much as EU countries; there are VISA problems
- Difficult to answer: there is an administrative issue because non-EU have no budget and a relationship dimension because it takes time to know each other and learn how to communicate
- Be more knowledgeable and flexible in dealing with each country taking into account its prevailing political and financial context
- Step up interaction among participants
- Share responsibilities and actively involve key persons
- Help all participants so that each one attains a minimum standard permitting accurate information exchange

Project organization

- A very democratic schema, enabling all countries to have a saying in matters of common interest, still offering the project a concrete organizational structure
- A very well organized project; the leaders of the project and the Steering Committee are really doing a great job
- Taking into account existing difficulties, it succeeded to a great extent
- Do not know management rules, not enough
- Reinforce the role and participation of non-European countries in the project
- Clarify management rules
- Include focal points at sub-national level (district, region) in every country

The Network's future

- Ideally, through the epidemic intelligence activities (WP6), public health issues of common interest for participating countries will be communicated real-time across the EpiSouth area, followed by the activation of established mechanisms of action and response regarding cross-border transmission, both for zoonoses (WP8) and vaccine preventable diseases (WP7)
- Devise plans of action and responses as regarding cross border transmission of zoonosis and vaccine preventable diseases that are common to all EpiSouth countries
- Set up courses more specific to the particular situations in each country or maybe each area
- Organize subject oriented meetings: zoonotic diseases, legislation on infectious diseases control in different countries
- More training. More training in statistics
- Include other issues: Influenza epi and pandemic surveillance
- Topics are OK for the future. More priority to migrant population and VPD
- Zoonosis: move from priorities identification to a plan of action about diseases, labs and VET
- VPD & Migrants: focus even on a single topic using an applied and workable approach
- Concentrate on priorities and keep the same topics in order to avoid dispersion of energies

- Deal with non-communicable diseases, especially cardio-vascular diseases, diabetes and cancer
- Clarify division of labor between EpiSouth Network and WHO, ECDC etc. in order to avoid overlapping
- Address more specific needs
- Expand access to public
- Develop e-training
- Move towards more uniformity regarding Public Health aspects across all EpiSouth countries
- Reinforce the collaboration with WHO, and other Networks (reference labs...)
- Create mechanisms of technical assistance to face threats
- Establish a regional laboratory Network
- Prepare Strategic documents and Guidelines for different activities
- Design a common curricula to be adapted by each country
- Integrate with the European seroepidemiological surveillance Network (ESEN)
- Become like CDC/Atlanta which is present and helps everywhere in the world giving consultation, training, support to epidemics investigations particularly with dangerous, rare diseases, in large outbreaks and disasters

Set of questions submitted to and replies from Focal Points

This section presents in a detailed format the results from the set of questions distributed to all focal points in early 2009. Just a few changes to the English language were made trying to maintain the meaning of the statements. Most important ideas are highlighted.

1. How far has EpiSouth contributed to better sharing of data and knowledge across organizations in different nations? Do you have any suggestions to improve this aspect?

I am satisfied with the way EpiSouth is conducive to information dissemination; but I always expect the information to be

1- Informative about the situation

2- Pedagogic about what is happening

3- Timely, so we can take preventive measures.

Too much reliance on electronic web Bulletin in its recent format cannot guarantee the accessibility of all EpiSouth members to the above mentioned objectives.

Through EpiSouth platform we enhanced and improved the communication of events regarding communicable diseases with organizations in many countries (especially within the Balcan area). This great thing should be sustained in the future.

EpiSouth is an important source of information and dissemination relating to communicable diseases and also for the participation of non-European countries. Countries have different experiences and expertise in this area. Support the participating countries.

EpiSouth has contributed in networking of the participants of the various working packages promoting the sharing of information, knowledge and experience. Information provided through EpiSouth Weekly Epidemiological Bulletin, though interesting and summing up, for those working at the level of ECDC appear to be duplication. The importance of sharing data and knowledge across organisations in different nations beyond EU has to be emphasized.

EpiSouth contribution in sharing data and knowledge is pursued through the exchange of information and data on transmissible diseases, particularly within WPs, through the reinforcement of experience by the communication and training and through the understanding of the constraints and the obligations faced by some to get good and valuable epidemiological information within the country and to share them. EpiSouth contributed also to exercise with IHR aspects.

Reinforce the contribution of the members to give information/news on a routine bases even about little events and interventions.

In my opinion being part of EpiSouth project was very useful for participants from our National Institute. We were able to get to know better also organizations dealing with public health and communicable diseases in other countries especially outside Europe.

EpiSouth website has contributed to sharing data and knowledge across participating countries since it has been established. EpiSouth website should be linked with other Networks especially for some selected diseases.

EpiSouth contributed significantly to better sharing of knowledge across organizations in the participating countries, both through the compilation of the various WPs' questionnaires by all participating countries, as well as through its networking activities that enabled participants to better comprehend the various approaches used by countries regarding epidemiological issues. In addition, the "missions" foreseen by the project in the context of the realization of the WPs' goals, were a very effective way of getting to know other countries' systems and procedures, by actually visiting them.

EpiSouth has contributed better sharing of data and knowledge across organizations in different nations through better coordination between Ministry of Health (department) in countries which are included in Project, ECDC, non-governmental organizations, Health Protect Agencies which will disseminate data in Network health organizations.

The Electronic Bulletin is a very useful and practical tool for exchanging relevant information on public health threats between participating countries. It will be a step forward to develop some kind of early warning system at regional level as well as to strengthen training and capacity building and share successful prevention approaches and guidelines.

Actually EPSOUTH contributed well in sharing data and knowledge through the EPSOUTH bulletin and training modules on surveillance, the 1st and 2nd, already conducted in Madrid, and the 3rd due in June 2009. Also through the Questionnaires from WPs dealing with zoonoses and vaccination.

I suggest developing the bulletin by adding pages about selected infectious diseases from all EPSOUTH countries to be published on a weekly or monthly bases.

The very concept of EpiSouth-the proximity of the countries as regards geographic area and common targets shared was a very good beginning. There was the collection of data from the countries, publication of the results from the questionnaires. These all contributed to better sharing. So there has been contribution but maybe not enough. It may be useful to prioritize a number of infections according to their occurrence, morbidity and mortality and see how data is collected in different countries, how this data can be compared and find ways of helping each other to improve surveillance, diagnostics and burden of disease.

2. Do you believe that EpiSouth is contributing toward or has the potential to play a role in the development of solutions to common problems in the field of infectious diseases epidemiology and control and, specifically training, epidemic intelligence, zoonosis, vaccine preventable diseases and migrants? Do you have any suggestions to improve this aspect?

Yes for sure they can play this role in many ways

- 1- Technical assistance to who is in need; and here I do mean right from planning process to intervention which in its area must have schedules for training.*
- 2- Advocating for financial aid for people living in unstable environment like migrants.*
- 3- Finally encouraging partners for carrying up effective surveillance system and best use of web for sharing information.*

I think that it is always possible to improve the control of infectious diseases by the exchange of experience and information which allow to better target specific health problems (especially cross border issues) and can adapt strategies. Training is also to reinforce competencies with new methods and specific course objectives.

Suggestions: more training with possible participation of provincial teams, develop e-learning, organize visits to exchange experience after identifying specific needs.

Yes, I am confident in the importance of the project coordination and participation in finding solutions to any potential problem faced by any country member of the project through meetings and exchange of experiences and views in the field of Communicable diseases epidemiology and training.

It has the potential and has already contributed in some ways but more can be done. Most of the countries share common problems regarding Public Health training, emergence of infections and cross border expansion, Epidemic Intelligence, vaccine preventable disease and migrant populations. EpiSouth needs to continue working on these common problems and continue improving surveillance for all EpiSouth countries.

I believe that EpiSouth Network has the potential to develop some solutions to defined problems and significant gaps in control of communicable diseases through more productive discussions at plenary conferences and regular meetings. It is very important to produce the planned documents/guidelines on specific topics (epidemic intelligence, zoonosis and vaccine preventable diseases, migrants and other most at risk populations) which should be cornerstone for all future activities.

Yes, I hope that EpiSouth will play a Global role in developing solutions to common problems in the field of Epidemiology and Infectious diseases, emerging and reemerging diseases and Disasters either natural or man made in the world as CDC/ Atlanta or at least at level of EpiSouth countries by establishing rapid response team at regional or EpiSouth levels.

Yes, I believe it does, because the first step in finding a solution is to better understand the problem. The project has significantly contributed in depicting the present situation in the area it covers, as well as in charting needs and problems regarding the above mentioned subjects. In addition, through its networking activities, it has contributed in creating the channels of communication that are necessary when solutions to common problems are investigated.

I believe that EpiSouth is contributing toward or has the potential to play a role in the development of solutions to common problems in the field of infectious diseases epidemiology and control and specifically training (elimination measles and rubella,

surveillance, implementation of IHR, implementation of Guidelines on responding to detection of wild poliovirus in "polio free" countries, pandemic of new influenza virus...), epidemic intelligence, zoonosis, vaccine preventable diseases, sexually transmitted diseases, HIV/AIDS...

Yes, I strongly believe that EpiSouth has that kind of potential, especially in the development of common solutions in the field of communicable diseases and should be continued also in the future.

EpiSouth has been contributing towards the above goals. In particular it has offered the opportunity of training to officials of the countries participating. In the field of zoonoses we would expect to see an enhanced cooperation and networking and means of direct communication between HPH and VPH of different countries especially regarding dissemination of information. The results of the survey that was conducted by EPISOUTH in relation to vaccination and migrant populations can become a source for identification of common areas for further collaboration.

To date, EpiSouth has highlighted several problems in the countries part of the Network. In the future, EpiSouth should cooperate with organizations such as the ECDC and WHO to share the data and knowledge with the member countries of EpiSouth.

3. Do you think that the current project organization (Steering Committee, WP leaders, Focal Points, Steering Teams) is adequate to support the activities of the Network? Do you have any suggestions to improve this aspect?

Yes, adequate but there is the need to encourage more participation from some countries so the bulk of the work is not solely done by the larger countries. However, it must be acknowledged that the smaller countries may not have the resources (both financial and human) to make major contributions to organization.

Yes I do, the focal point and MOH in EpiSouth countries are well qualified and have the experience to implement or support any activities of the Network, what we need is the political and financial support from the participating countries. Such as Establishing a Response team either at EpiSouth or regional level, e.g. Middle East, North Africa, European level.

To participate and support when these teams need, anywhere, any time.

Yes, I believe it is. It is a very democratic schema, enabling all countries to have a saying in matters of common interest, still offering the project a concrete organizational structure that is crucial for any project to be effective.

I think that the current project organization is adequate to support the activities of the Network, but I believe that, in order to better share data and information, it is important include focal points at sub-national level (district, region) in every country.

Current project organization is adequate to support the activities of the Network for the beginning.

The EpiSouth project is very well organized. The leaders of the project and the Steering Committee are doing really great job.

It appears to be adequate.

I hope at this stage of the project to be supportive of its components such as the Steering Committee and WP officials and Focal Points, through the Network. I think that there will be agreements with international institutions that it is shared with goal and objectives, supporting the continuity and viability of the project.

Though I believe that all focal points are doing their best in order to make the objectives of the project achievable, still the work is not optimal:

Training must be offered more frequently than the annual training in Madrid.

The summation of evaluation activities is not disseminated to all members or probably I have missed it; I am looking forward to hear about the evaluation in Sofia in some of the presentations.

4. How would you describe the EpiSouth working relationship between non-European and European organizations and individuals? Do you have any suggestions to improve this aspect?

EpiSouth aims to support and strengthen the relations between the European and non-European countries through meetings, training courses and electronic correspondence; EpiSouth also seeks to build intimate human relationships through love and respect between all.

I think that working relationship between non European and European organizations and individuals is a little limited because some political, economic, cultural, ethnics and other reasons. I believe that official coordination between Ministries of Health has the potential to play a role in the development of solutions.

Non-European countries such as Turkey were supported by EpiSouth project. We support this positive approach.

I believe that EpiSouth has used every exertion to facilitate cooperation between non-European and European countries in the context of the project and - taking into account the various existing difficulties - I think it succeeded in a great extend.

To enhance the communication among epidemiologist and other professionals involved in public health in order to obtain a more comprehensive discussion regarding some priorities and methodologies for surveillance and control of communicable diseases (CD) at regional level.

The working relationship between non-European and European countries is very good. In my opinion, one of the major advantages of this project is trying to establish connections regarding communicable diseases in such international environment.

Relationship is good. Members feel close more and more through continual communication and participation at meetings. Understanding and expressing wishes to help have reinforced relationships and built friendship.

Suggestions: reinforce the role and participation of non-European countries in the project. Develop the communication and meetings.

Networking so far has been by exchange of knowledge and experience through a central point (WP leader) and in response to specific stimuli (reply to questionnaires mainly). Only EpiSouth meetings have been the point for actual exchange of information and knowledge. Other ways may be considered such as forums, bilateral between two countries communications etc.

We also have to bear in mind the activities initiated by ECDC in the same areas, in order to avoid, duplication.

The relations are very good and I feel that we are in a process of forming or building a unique organizational culture for EpiSouth countries. But there is one important point that the organizers are not aware of the difficulties of some EpiSouth partners like our case in occupied Palestinian territories and the difficulties in traveling to participate; I do not know if this difficulty is being faced by other partners from none European countries. The only way to improve relations is to be more knowledgeable and flexible in dealing with each country and in accordance with its prevailing political and financial environment.

There is a good working relationship and it is important that it is further strengthened and improved upon.

Actually at the beginning of the project it was conservative, but after time it has become more smooth and good; conventionality has been greatly reduced disappearing in most countries and individuals and trust has started to take place.

5. Do you think the means and frequency of communication used by EpiSouth members are adequate for information sharing and learning? Is the EpiSouth platform of value for your work (user-friendly, good quantity and quality of relevant information, good interaction with other Network participants)? Do you have any suggestions to improve this aspect?

Yes, I think so as the EpiSouth bulletin is published on a weekly basis; communication about hot issues is immediate without waiting for the weekly bulletin.

It would be useful to receive regular updates of what each working group is doing and not wait for the annual meeting. In this way all participants would become accessible and offer their expertise whenever required.

I suggest more practical exchange of different experiences as well as examples of good practices in the area of surveillance of CD in the Mediterranean and Balkans areas through more meetings and more specific training tailored to the needs of the majority of participating countries.

I think the means and frequency of communication used by EpiSouth members are adequate for information sharing and learning and EpiSouth platform is valuable for my work (user friendly, good quantity and quality of relevant information, good interaction with other Network participants).

The EpiSouth platform is really user-friendly and surely has the potential of facilitating a great deal the interaction between Network participants. However, I have the impression (which might be mistaken) that for the majority of communications the conventional way of sending e-mails was used by the participants, whereas the discussion forums' potential was not used as it could have been. Perhaps, WP2 should stress again the importance of taking advantage of all the various possibilities that the platform offers.

Though EpiSouth has advanced a lot in a short time, more has to be done in the area of information sharing and learning. EpiSouth platform is user friendly and of good quality of relevant information.

Communication and correspondence and the exchange of opinions and suggestions are ongoing. The project has become part of my career, I promote EpiSouth and disseminate its products among my colleagues at all levels in Jordan to take advantage of information and experience of others. Thank you EpiSouth!

Again I confirm that the information is valuable to advance preparedness.

Communication for information and learning is now good and improving. EpiSouth Network is relatively new and difficulties and constraints to build it derive from the number of members from different countries in different situations. The information in the platform is useful and I think it can be improved when more information will be added by WPs and members (bulletins, lists of contacts, e-learning, documents about studies and results of surveys...).

The means and frequency of communication used by EpiSouth members should be improved. Focal points should communicate with each other at least twice in a month using the web site.

The communication tool used for communication between EpiSouth members is very useful and easy to learn. Maybe it would be helpful to consider for the future to develop some kind of system for sharing information between collaborating countries regarding information important for epidemic intelligence.

It would be useful to receive regular updates of what each working group is doing and not wait for the annual meeting. This way all participants would be accessible and able to offer their expertise whenever required.

6. How do you see the long term future of EpiSouth, let's say in five years time? Ideally, how would you like the Network to evolve with respect to: training, epidemic intelligence, zoonosis, vaccine preventable diseases and migrants and other topics you consider important?

Important channels of communication have already been established, as well as certain data collected. The topic of migrants is a common and important one and more work needs to be done there. The Epidemic Intelligence with real time circulation of information should be continued and strengthened. Ideally there should be plans of action and responses as regarding cross border transmission of zoonosis and vaccine preventable diseases that are common to all EpiSouth countries. Each country or maybe each area will have specific training needs so these could be more specific to the particular situations. EpiSouth could follow the example of EpiNorth that has established itself well. Ultimately we would all like to see more uniformity regarding Public Health aspects in all the EpiSouth countries.

Hopefully to be like CDC/Atlanta, present and help everywhere in the world giving consultation, training, support Epidemics investigations particularly in danger, rare diseases or in large outbreaks. Disasters may occur in any part of the world and, as I said before, it is a great hope that I would like to see in the future of EpiSouth. To spread EPSOUTH activities to NCDs particularly Cancers registries, and prevention, Cardiovascular Diseases, Diabetes as it is now a public health problems almost all over the world.

To address more specific needs and to develop training programs on risk assessment methods appropriate for the majority of participating countries as well as to be clearer regarding the complementary activities of EpiSouth Network and WHO, ECDC etc. in order to avoid overlapping. Also, I think that it would be good to establish a regional laboratory Network.

I would like the Network to evolve with respect to training (IHR, surveillance, maintaining "polio free" status...). It is important to identify training needs, strengths and weaknesses, strategic options for criteria harmonization, prepare Strategic Documents and Guidelines for different activities.

Once the channels of communications are established, the next stage is to actually put them to work. Ideally, through the epidemic intelligence activities (WP6), public health issues of common interest for participating countries will be communicated real-time across the EpiSouth area, followed by the activation of established mechanisms of action and response regarding cross-border transmission, both for zoonoses (WP8) and vaccine preventable diseases (WP7). In addition, a systematically organized training program, that has the means of evaluating ongoing and changing training needs in the area, will provide the participants the opportunity to update their knowledge on current issues and methods in modern infectious diseases epidemiology.

The topics now dealt by EpiSouth are adequate. If EpiSouth communication can be improved, i.e. user friendly and with good quality, it will be a real Network instead of a short time project.

The EpiSouth project should keep trying to maintain good working relations between all collaborating countries. Sharing common knowledge is very important now and in the future and so the joint training activities. Further developments in the field of epidemic intelligence are also very important, maybe in the direction of some kind of tool for communication about important events in the field of communicable diseases.

Training: more courses with participation and specific targets relate to field intervention, zoonoses control strategies.

Develop e-training.

Epidemic intelligence: reinforce members' contribution in sharing information.

Reinforce the collaboration with WHO, and other Networks (reference labs...).

Create collaboration between labs and mechanisms of technical assistance to face threats.

Reinforce communication and meetings for WP members.

Zoonosis: training on specific zoonosis control, sustain needs for researches on relevant zoonotic problems (ie: multicentric surveys) to help members to improve prevention and control.

Reinforce communication and meetings for WP members.

Reinforce collaboration with MZCC.

EpiSouth has proved itself, mainly by offering the above to EU neighboring countries as well. The whole project has to be embraced by ECDC and continued with increased participation of EU neighboring countries (mainly those that belong to WHO EMRO).

We should try to enhance the interest of participants, by introducing new areas not already covered by existing EU activities.

Wishes for success and to continue to become an institution within the international setting concerning dissemination of data and information on communicable diseases.

Support epidemiological weekly Bulletin (WP6).

Remote online training in addition to continued meetings and courses (WP5)

Strengthen surveillance of emerging and reemerging diseases.

Strengthen and support electronic surveillance system.

I view EpiSouth to be more efficient in communication, and carrying out more effective intervention if we keep this momentum; though I am still concerned about the sustainability of this project in terms of financial support and having its own budget.