



EpiSouth Report 12/2010

EpiSouth Project

Final Evaluation Report (October 2006 - June 2010)

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1. WP3 Mandate and the Evaluation Plan

As stated in the project official documents, EpiSouth aims “to create a framework of collaboration on epidemiological issues in order to improve communicable diseases surveillance, communication and training across the countries of the Mediterranean and the Balkans”. The same text adds that “Epidemic intelligence will be based on already collected and circulating information. The added value of the project in this area will consist of the sorting out, verification, analysis and eventually the dissemination of information that is not readily available.” The instrument to turn such “framework of collaboration” into reality has been a Network of national gatekeepers responsible for communicable disease surveillance and control in the area. A network is defined as a loose-knit group formed primarily for the purpose of resource and information sharing. In order to reach its aim, EpiSouth has brought together individuals and organizations belonging to diverse professional, socio-economic, cultural and political traditions in a multi-national and multi-institutional effort. A difficulty faced by EpiSouth derived from the fact that there is no dominant language in the Mediterranean area and though English is the project working idiom, it represents the official language of only one member, i.e. Malta.

The idea of developing EpiSouth has taken origin from a previous analogous initiative in Europe, called EpiNorth, promoted by some Scandinavian countries in 1998 and involving Nordic and Baltic nations together with the Western Regions of Russia. EpiSouth faced greater complexities compared to EpiNorth because it involved a larger number of countries covering a wider territory, some of which have faced or are still confronting harsh political and military conflicts. Therefore it has represented a serious challenge not only from technical, professional and managerial perspectives, but also from the cultural and political viewpoints. Such considerations had implications not only for the project planning and implementation phases but also for the monitoring and evaluation aspects. Assessment of EpiSouth degree of success necessarily took into account its complexity and the obstacles peculiar to its context.

EpiSouth aimed at bringing about a functional Network of surveillance systems, allowing more intense exchange of information, faster and coordinated responses to threats and the adoption of common policies on surveillance. Monitoring and evaluation focused particularly on aspects critical for building the Network and for the outputs of the WPs. As far as Network building is concerned, the key question to which EpiSouth monitoring and evaluation attempted to answer is: “how far has the project contributed to resources and information sharing among the Network members?”. With regard to the vertical packages (WP6-Cross Border Epidemic Intelligence, WP7-VPD and Migrants and WP8-Cross Border Emerging zoonoses), the main question is: “have specific WPs delivered their products and achieved their objectives ?”

Given EpiSouth explicit goal of “building a network”, it was deemed reasonable to give special emphasis to investigate progress in bringing to life such Network. Moreover EpiSouth rather short timeframe together with the fact that participants were not tied up under a unique organizational arrangement and came from very diverse environments gave a special prominence to process issues. Establishing collaborative relationships among partners was the central concern and implied the necessity to pay attention to “soft management” dimensions such as trust, involvement, participation, consensus and commitment.

On the long run, EpiSouth will hopefully contribute to improve surveillance systems in individual participating countries in terms of simplicity, flexibility, acceptability, sensitiveness, representativeness, timeliness, Positive Predictive Value (PPV) and complexity¹ of surveillance data analysis. The Network will hopefully bring about higher capability in carrying out key tasks central to the surveillance function such as:

- Detect new health problems
- Detect epidemics
- Document spread of disease
- Provide quantitative estimates of the magnitude of morbidity and mortality
- Identify potential factors involved in disease occurrence
- Facilitate epidemiological and lab research
- Assess control activities

¹ Complexity refers to modern quantitative methods applied to surveillance, such as process control charts and regressions applied to the analysis to time series.

Nevertheless these aspects were not EpiSouth objectives, therefore the project evaluation effort has not focused on them.

The Annex to the contract acknowledged that monitoring and evaluation represent key components of EpiSouth. This means that, besides managerial arguments, there were formal obligations EpiSouth participants had to comply with which were described in the Annex I of the agreement. More specifically, among other points, this document stated the following:

4.3 Monitoring the execution of the project (pag.45)

“...An executive board (the EpiSouth Steering Committee) of the 6 Associated Partners leader of a Work Package will be established by the main partner to ensure that the aims and the objectives of the project are met. The executive board will be responsible for the performance management and monitoring of the project during the three years ...”

“EpiSouth has a work package (WP3) specifically dedicated to evaluate the project and its achievements....” (pag.53)

“... The main objective of the WP3 will be to evaluate the project and its achievements in terms of:

Respect of the scheduled milestones and deliverables according to the project WPs

Achievement of the stated project indicators, both for quantitative and qualitative aspects

Active participation of both associated and collaborating countries in the project activities”

“Description of work

...Each partner institution will contribute to update the achievements of its activities by evaluation form to be completed directly in the web-site...

...Partners forms will be periodically monitored in order to assess the respect of scheduled milestones, deliverables and project indicators”

EpiSouth Grant Agreement Annex I specified completion and acceptance criteria to evaluate the project. The first ones comprised:

- 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 spelled 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).

In order to make explicit how WP3 intended to translate its mandate into a strategy, this work package formulated the EpiSouth Evaluation plan. Such document first outlined fundamental concepts about evaluation adopted in this context, next presented EpiSouth evaluation plan, looking at three separate areas as defined by the above quoted mandate of the evaluation package. After that the plan looked at the sources of evidence it intended to use in the evaluation process and finally presented tools for data collections and a glossary defining basic terms. WP3 key products were the Evaluation Plan and its output, i.e. the Interim Monitoring Report (EpiSouth Report 8/2009) and this Final Evaluation Report (EpiSouth Report 12/2010).

To begin with, key definitions and general principles applied to the evaluation of EpiSouth are discussed in the following pages. Afterwards results obtained from the submission of the tools to project participants are presented. Sharing definitions, concepts and frameworks was considered a precondition for communication and joint work, allowing readers to have a deeper understanding of the evaluation strategy and plan. As the great scholar Lewin said “there is nothing as useful as a good theory”. Even more so for a geographically dispersed and culturally different team whose members had few opportunities to meet face to face and use more than ten different languages.

An evaluation was defined as a systematic assessment of a program, a project or a policy, implying the application of formal, rigorous social sciences methods to questions concerning the results achieved through a certain initiative. A scientific approach going beyond intuitions and hearsay has been considered as necessary to support important decisions about the program, to convince multiple stakeholders regarding its value and to investigate complex outcomes determined by several elements.

In the context of the Evaluation plan Monitoring was defined as “the systematic assessment of the operations of the project compared to a set of standards as a means of contributing to its improvement”. The Webster’s dictionary definition of monitoring is: “to pay continued close attention to (something) for a particular purpose”. Evaluation was characterized as “the systematic assessment of the results of the project compared to a set of standards as a means of

- Improving its effectiveness
- Making participants accountable
- Consolidating success
- Optimizing resources’ allocation
- Authorizing project continuation/ revision/termination.”

Evaluation was deemed important in order to reach two aims: support decisions and promote learning, for example how to work effectively together and how to create value for each partner and the whole project.

EpiSouth has been monitored and evaluated from two perspectives: outcomes and process. Outcomes refer to effects, results, benefits produced by the effort for its intended beneficiaries. Results are of two kinds: expected, i.e. wanted, and unexpected, i.e. unintended. The latter can be positive or negative. Impact means effects which are long term or beyond the established goals. Process refers to how things are done, the way a program is conducted, how far it follows its design.

Monitoring and evaluation allow to articulate a judgement about a program degree of success. The yardstick against which the project accomplishment was measured were the goals identified in the planning document and also the expectations of different stakeholders, such as sponsors, managers, practitioners and participants. Inevitably, some of these expectations conflicted with each other and the evaluation process tried to strike a conceptual, methodological and political balance among different positions.

The attempt was to collect information perceived as credible, i.e. convincing and relevant, in order to come to a judgement. The sources of information were multiple ensuring diverse and representative points of view. Likewise the methods of data collection

consisted of various approaches, such as questionnaires, in depth interviews, focus groups, observations and records, depending on the questions asked, data availability and costs. Various sources and methods were brought together with the aim to draw a reliable illustration of the program effects and functioning.

A basic management principle adopted by EpiSouth evaluation strategy was that monitoring and evaluation are key activities in any project. In other words, if we do not know where we are and how far we have travelled with regard to where we had planned to go, we are lost. We are lost both as individuals and as a group because we do not know how much we have delivered and how we can improve what we have already carried out. Only when we are aware of what we have achieved we can take rational decisions to change course of action or do even better.

Monitoring and evaluation were conceived as instruments enabling EpiSouth management to run the project and also for individual members to stop and confront what was planned with what was actually achieved. Further, monitoring and evaluation were thought as prerequisites of accountability and credibility. Mutual accountability within a team, i.e. being explicit of what every member of a group achieved and how his/her task contributed to its goals, was considered indispensable inside and outside the team, because credibility follows accountability especially with outsiders, first of all those who provide funds. Accountability and credibility also facilitate sustainability, because financing organizations and, more in general, the authorizing environment will feel confident that they are supporting a viable and worthy initiative.

Monitoring and evaluation tools were not designed with a perspective of bureaucratic control or, worse, witch hunt and blaming. At the same time, the evaluation team was aware of the possibility of destructive and unscrupulous uses of monitoring activities and strived to ensure that nobody felt threatened by reporting achievements and obstacles. Finally the monitoring approach reflected the idea that trust building takes time and avoidance of important issues is an impediment toward such aim.

Besides general managerial considerations, some issue peculiar to EpiSouth made monitoring and evaluation especially important. EpiSouth represented a journey into an uncharted territory; therefore the learning process for individuals, subgroups like WPs and

the whole EpiSouth was most important and flexibility in all aspects of management, including planning and monitoring, was indispensable. Monitoring helped to make implementation a learning experience instead of a process out of sight. The more an initiative needs flexibility, the more monitoring becomes necessary since such tool can reveal systematically and almost in real time which changes have been adopted and why, allowing the assessment of the level of implementation of main activities and the overall project.

A central purpose of EpiSouth evaluation was to provide answers to questions deemed crucial by those who funded, designed, managed and carried out the project and also those who, though not directly involved, were its main beneficiaries. The information collected through the monitoring and evaluation processes has also be used for lobbying and promoting sustainability. Showing that the project advanced successfully, even with defensible modification, was considered one of the best tools to gain credibility vis-à-vis the current and future supporters and funders.

As previously mentioned, the EpiSouth Grant Agreement Annex I identified three evaluation objectives and the logic behind them are further explored in the following paragraphs.

a. Respect of scheduled milestones and deliverables according to the project WPs.

This objective implied to check progress toward appropriate and timely:

Resources acquisition

Processes establishment

Availability of deliverables

Resources acquisition referred to three prerequisites necessary to set off the project: **Financial support** to ensure participation of collaborating countries. This was a critical activity because involvement by non-EU countries depended on mobilization of additional funds beyond those allocated to EpiSouth. The EU Commission representative within the project played a crucial role in this respect as well as the effort of the EpiSouth Partners.

Updated lists of institutions and contacts represented an essential step toward the Network building in general and also for specific WP such as Zoonoses control.

A functional website was considered one of the most important tools to promote regular communication among partners and also the vehicle for the publication and sharing of the Bulletin.

b. Processes establishment

Managerial processes were defined as methods spelling out how project key aspects had to be dealt with, the logic being that only well-designed and functional processes could ensure that resources were productively used toward the attainment of the project goals and contributed to positive general attitudes toward the initiative, promoting trust, involvement, and collaboration. On the contrary, inadequate processes lead to confusion, waste, frustration and conflict. Three important processes selected for monitoring were: meetings management, communication mechanisms and institutional building.

Meetings management. EpiSouth meetings were summoned for different purposes gathering different groups of professionals, such as the Project Steering Committee, the WP Steering Teams and Countries Focal Points during EpiSouth general meeting. Meetings are important events in any organization and especially so for a multi-national and multi-institutional effort with the aim to create a network where there were few occasions to interact face to face. Regardless the meetings purpose and size, they should not be wasted opportunities and should be conducted on the basis of modern management principles. Four of these were explicitly assessed: a) assignment of the key roles as leader, facilitator, recorder and participants; b) degree of openness regarding the decision on how to decide, i.e. choosing consensus when the issues dealt with are especially complex and important; c) degree of awareness among participants that no organization has clear authority and agenda and solutions should be negotiable; d) degree of consensus regarding openness in conflict management.

A specific instrument, called “EpiSouth Meetings Evaluation Tool” (**Annex 1**), has been designed to assess how far EpiSouth meetings respond to participants expectations and reflect the adoption of basic managerial principles.

Communication mechanisms. This dimension refers to basic rules concerning the content, frequency, style and channels of communication. Communication is a central feature of any functional network and its members should have clear and shared ideas

concerning when, why and how to connect with other partners. As far as style is concerned, the evaluation process assessed how open, frank, respectful and constructive communication among members was, especially when disagreement emerged. It also looked at how far dissenters were taken seriously and attempts to involve them in the problem solving process promoted.

A specific instrument, called “EpiSouth Network Development Monitoring Tool” (**Annex 2**), has been designed to look, among other issues, at communication within EpiSouth community.

c. Making deliverables available

Resources and processes are meant to produce deliverables, i.e. outputs. EpiSouth deliverables identified in the project Grant Agreement Annex I included the following ones:

- Work-plans adopted at the 1st, 2nd and 3rd Steering Committee meetings for year 1, 2 and 3,
- Reports of the steering committee meetings,
- 1st and 2nd interim technical implementation report, including interim financial report,
- Final technical report of the project, including financial report,
- EpiSouth web-site,
- EpiSouth electronic Bulletin,
- Participations to scientific seminars on EpiSouth issues,
- Final evaluation report,
- Networking plan,
- Directory of institutions involved in surveillance in South Europe and Mediterranean area,
- Proceeding of the 3 Network Meetings, including the Final Conference,
- Teaching material on the 1st, 2nd and 3rd training modules ,
- Directory of training courses and fellowships of interest for the project,
- Cross border epidemic procedures,
- Section on cross-border epidemic on EpiSouth web-site with alarm posted,
- Final strategic document on cross-border epidemic intelligence,
- Participations to scientific seminars on cross-border epidemic intelligence,

- Report on assessment survey for vaccine preventable diseases and migrant populations,
- Recommendations for improving access to immunizations and exchanging data on vaccine preventable diseases,
- Strategic document on vaccine preventable diseases and migrant populations,
- Data-base with Human Public Health (HPH) and Veterinary Public Health (VPH) contact points,
- Strategic document on risk assessment methods for cross border zoonoses.

The timely availability and value of these deliverables has been regularly checked by WP1 coordinator, together with the WP 3 manager and the EpiSouth leader. When deadlines were surpassed reminders have been sent by the coordinator to specific WP leaders.

Procedures for EpiSouth monitoring and evaluation

The following couple of pages describe standard operating procedures adopted for EpiSouth monitoring and evaluation.

Monitoring

On a quarterly basis WP leaders were asked to indicate, on the table format of the WP Yearly Work Plan, the level of achievement of specific activities. The Yearly Work Plan was what EpiSouth management and WP leaders agreed to accomplish during the following year.

At the bottom of the WP Yearly Plan table, the WP leader has also specified degree and quality of the achievements, reasons behind missed deadlines, possible problems encountered, decisions made (e.g. rescheduling and collaboration with other WPs) and actions already taken or to be taken. The subjects who had access to this information included the members of the Steering Committee and of the specific WP Steering Team (e.g. WP6 ST associates only accessed information regarding WP6 monitoring).

Evaluation

The evidence used to assess the project degree of success has been extracted from the following sources:

- Key products (e.g. Training modules, Procedures on cross-border epidemics control, Recommendations for improving access to vaccines),
- Web site structure, content and frequency of use,
- Meeting minutes,
- Interviews with project personnel, PH Institutes and
- Focus groups with professionals involved in the same vertical WP and horizontal WP
- Six questionnaires specifically designed to investigate project main aspects. These comprise:
 - *Meeting Evaluation Tool*, a questionnaire distributed to all participants at the end of the project meetings ;
 - *Network Development Monitoring Tool*, a questionnaire distributed to all participants of the project meetings;
 - *Overall project and horizontal packages (WP1 to WP5) Monitoring Tool*, a questionnaires concerning project 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 key aspects (Communication and Networking, Project Organization, 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 investigated what participants thought and felt about general meetings organization, management and results.

EpiSouth Network Development Monitoring Tool looked at issues such as participants understanding of project goals and perception of membership, i.e. communication openness, group cohesion, collaborative relationships, trust, involvement, participation, consensus and commitment among partners.

Two questionnaires concerning project WPs management and subject matters were compiled on line by the Focal Points (FPs) and a set of questions about project key aspects was also submitted to all FPs. Telephone interviews investigating more in depth

the same above mentioned aspects were carried out selecting FPs on the basis of a convenience sample. Finally, the Monitoring Sheets also allowed to determine progress for management and vertical packages. In order to monitor the degree of completion of activities that each partner institution had responsibility to carry out, WP3, in collaboration with the other management packages (WP1, 2 and 4), designed forms which allowed to compare what was planned with what was completed by each WP.

Such questionnaires have been designed to facilitate the collection of information regarding elements critical to the project success. Part of the information considered processes: for example, EpiSouth Network Development Monitoring Tool looked at issues such as participants' understanding of project goals and opinion about membership, communication openness and group cohesion. Other questionnaires explored content issues, for example the Vaccine Preventable Diseases and migrant populations (WP7) Evaluation Tool dealt with the investigation of access to immunization of migrant population and data collection on cases/outbreaks of vaccine preventable diseases among immigrants in Mediterranean and Balkan countries.

The following sections report on the main points emerged from the above mentioned tools, submitted to participants from Roma meeting (March 2007) until the project conclusion. This Final Evaluation Report also briefly looks at the web-site utilization. In accordance with the mandate of WP3, this document does not cover completed activities and financial aspects which were included in other formal documents.

2. EpiSouth Meetings monitoring

During the Third EpiSouth Meeting held in Sofia from the 30th of March to the 1st of April 2009, a questionnaire was distributed to all participants with the purpose to assess their views on how the meeting was run. The same questionnaire was used during the previous gathering in Athens and a longer version at the First Meeting in Rome allowing a comparative appraisal of the events. We used a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "Totally disagree" to "Totally agree".

The questionnaire was filled out by 34 over 62 (54%) participants (65% in Athens and 40% in Rome). We do not know why just more than half participants did not complete it and how representative of the whole group respondents are.

The report looks into individual questions and then offers a general scrutiny of the results. The following portion of the document shows, for each answer, the distribution of values, and a short comment. The text and numbers in *italics* (e.g. 5) reproduce the possible answers to each sentence, while integers in bold (e.g. **5**) indicate number of responses to each category (e.g. 20 answered “*Totally agree*” to the first sentence).

QUESTIONNAIRE

AGENDA

1. The meeting’s goals were clearly explained and understood

Distribution of values

- 1: *Totally disagree* **0** (0%)
- 2: **0** (0%)
- 3: **2** (6%)
- 4: **18** (53%)
- 5: *Totally agree* **14** (41%)

94% of respondents think that meeting goals were explained and comprehensible; only 6% have some doubts about this aspect. This represents an improvement compared to the Rome and Athens meeting where participants answering 4 or 5 amounted to 80 and 73%, respectively.

2. Some important topic was left out of the agenda

Distribution of values

- 1: *Totally disagree* **13** (38%)
- 2: **1** (4%)
- 3: **11** (32%)
- 4: **9** (26%)
- 5: *Totally agree* **0** (0%)

41% think no important subject was ignored; a drop from 59% in Athens and 72% in Rome. Still 26% felt some significant topic was ignored. We do not know if the inverted order of the Likert scale produced some confusion in the answers. In fact no subject left out was mentioned in the following answer.

3. If yes which one(s)

The topics that some participant felt were left out are:

None cited.

4. The topics on the agenda were covered with sufficient depth avoiding repetitions and waste of time

Distribution of values

- 1: *Totally disagree* **0**(0%)
- 2: **1** (3%)
- 3: **4** (12%)
- 4: **22** (65%)
- 5: *Totally agree* **7** (20%)

85% perceive that the extent with which issues on the agenda were covered was adequate and there were no repetitions (better than 64 and 72% in the previous meetings). Only one participant felt that issues were not discussed carefully enough, compared to almost one third in Athens.

PROCESS

5. There was adequate differentiation of roles to insure participation, productivity and protection of group members

Distribution of values

- 1: *Totally disagree* **0** (0%)
- 2: **1** (3%)
- 3: **6** (18%)
- 4: **17** (52%)
- 5: *Totally agree* **9** (27%)

79% think that roles differentiation was satisfactory compared to 80% and 60% in the first two meetings

6. The method of decision-making was understood and acceptable

Distribution of values

- 1: *Totally disagree* **0** (0%)
- 2: **0** (0%)
- 3: **5** (15%)
- 4: **20** (59%)
- 5: *Totally agree* **9** (26%)

85% consider the decision-making process was understandable and satisfactory (certainly an improvement vis-à-vis prior scores: 69% and 65%). Only 15% is uncertain (25% in Athens) but nobody believes there was a problem with the decision-making process (6% in Athens).

7. The discussion was open enough to consider different opinions and options

Distribution of values

- 1: *Totally disagree* 0 (0%)
- 2: 1 (3%)
- 3: 4 (12%)
- 4: 8 (23%)
- 5: *Totally agree* 21 (62%)

85% are convinced that the discussion allowed taking into consideration different views and alternatives, an opinion shared by past meetings' participants. Only one person disagrees.

8. The decisions which should have been debated during the meeting were already made before it

Distribution of values

- 1: *Totally disagree* 5 (15%)
- 2: 6 (18%)
- 3: 11 (34%)
- 4: 6 (18%)
- 5: *Totally agree* 5 (15%)

33% believe that the choices considered during the meeting were not set up before (38% and 22% in Athens and Rome), and the same percentage was convinced of the opposite. The latter score is very similar to the previous figures.

FACILITATOR

9. The facilitator was able to keep the meeting moving along smoothly

- 1: *Totally disagree* 0 (0%)
- 2: 0 (0%)
- 3: 1 (3%)
- 4: 19 (56%)
- 5: *Totally agree* 14 (41%)

97% think the facilitators run the meeting straightforwardly (77%in Athens and 92% in Rome). This represents an excellent performance which applies to every facilitator who run the meeting.

10. Everyone had a chance to participate

- 1: *Totally disagree* 0 (0%)
- 2: 0 (0%)
- 3: 0 (0%)

4: **8** (24%)
5: *Totally agree* **26** (76%)

Everybody shares the view that all participants had the opportunity to contribute to the meeting, a superior outcome compared to Athens and Rome (about 90% in both prior encounters). Nobody felt left out from the discussion (6% reported some difficulty in Athens).

11. The facilitator was able to remain neutral and not get involved

1: *Totally disagree* **1** (3%)
2: **0** (0%)
3: **3** (9%)
4: **15** (44%)
5: *Totally agree* **15** (44%)

88% (86 and 92% in the previous meetings) deemed the facilitators impartial. Only one participant fully disagrees.

LEADER

12. The leader was capable in getting the group to focus on common tasks in an orderly fashion

1: *Totally disagree* **0** (0%)
2: **0** (0%)
3: **2** (6%)
4: **18** (53%)
5: *Totally agree* **14** (41%)

94% (81 and 75% in the previous meetings) agree that the leader was able to guide the meeting toward shared assignments.

13. The leader refrained from dominating the meeting

1: *Totally disagree* **0** (0%)
2: **0** (0%)
3: **2** (6%)
4: **22** (65%)
5: *Totally agree* **10** (29%)

94% (65 and 59% in the previous meetings) think that the leader did not impose herself.

The leader was effective in bringing the group to closure and agreeing on specific actions items

1: *Totally disagree* **0** (0%)
2: **1** (3%)
3: **4** (12%)

4: **13 (38%)**
5: **Totally agree 16 (47%)**

85% (77% in Athens) believe that the meeting leader was capable to guide the participants toward consensus on definite activities. Only one participant believes that the meeting was not led towards a concrete conclusion.

RECORDER

The recorder captured the basic ideas of the participants

1: *Totally disagree* **0 (0%)**
2: **0 (0%)**
3: **3 (9%)**
4: **16 (47%)**
5: *Totally agree* **15 (44%)**

91% (83 and 96% in the previous meetings) are convinced that the recorder appropriately summarized participants' contributions.

16. The recorder prepared a group memo and send it out to the participants

1: *Totally disagree* **10 (44%)**
2: **5 (22%)**
3: **5 (22%)**
4: **1 (4%)**
5: *Totally agree* **2 (8%)**

44% disagree. It is worth reporting that this sentence was in the questionnaire submitted during Sofia Meeting when the outcomes of the group discussions were always reported in the plenary sessions.

17. The memo was accurate and understandable to participants

1: *Totally disagree* **0 (0%)**
2: **1 (3%)**
3: **4 (12%)**
4: **11 (32%)**
5: *Totally agree* **18 (53%)**

85% agree. Possibly many participants refer to the summaries presented during plenary sessions.

PARTICIPANTS

Participants know what other members are working on and how they contribute to the collective success

1: *Totally disagree* 1 (3%)
2: 4 (12%)
3: 11 (32%)
4: 11 (32%)
5: *Totally agree* 7 (21%)

53% (42% in Athens) know about other members' roles in the project. Still 15% are unsure about other participants' functions.

19. Participants left the meeting confident that other members were completely committed to the decisions that were agreed on, even if there was initial disagreement

1: *Totally disagree* 0 (0%)
2: 1 (3%)
3: 8 (23%)
4: 3 (9%)
5: *Totally agree* 22 (65%)

74% (63 and 38% in the previous meetings) were convinced that other members' commitment toward the decisions agreed upon was complete; 24% (29 and 57%) were not sure about other members' dedication. Only one participant (3% vs 8% and 5%) see a problem around this critical aspect.

20. Participants challenged one another about their approaches and plans in open and respectful ways

1: *Totally disagree* 0 (0%)
2: 1 (3%)
3: 7 (21%)
4: 12 (35%)
5: *Totally agree* 14 (41%)

76% (75 and 65% in the previous meetings) were convinced that discussion about content was authentic and the tone considerate. 21% were uncertain (same in Athens) but only one felt there was some problem with reserve or disrespect.

21. Participants ended discussions with clear and specific resolutions and calls for action

1: *Totally disagree* 0 (0%)
2: 1 (3%)
3: 8 (23%)
4: 18 (53%)
5: *Totally agree* 7 (21%)

74% (80 and 74% in the previous meetings) believed that the discussion led to definite decisions and assignments of tasks. 24% (18% in Athens) were uncertain, but only one participant believed that the meeting did not lead to identifiable conclusions toward future actions.

22. On the overall the meeting was exciting

- 1: Totally disagree **0** (0%)
2: **0** (0%)
3: **4** (12%)
4: **16** (47%)
5: Totally agree **14** (41%)

88% (78 and 67% in the previous meetings) felt the meeting was motivating and inspiring; nobody considered it uninteresting or boring.

The following comments, offered by participants, are organized by theme:

Importance of the meeting

- *I think the meeting as an opportunity to see other and discuss issues interesting and related topics to our work and exchange experiences.*

Meeting preparation

- *Preparatory documents should be sent more in advance in order to be prepared. It should encourage FP participation.*
- *It would be of value to have as printed out copies the presentations during the meeting days.*

Running the meeting

- *This is a very difficult task, to plan, coordinate and carry out a meeting at this scale; however, this particular meeting was efficiently planned and even though very busy, also very beneficial well done!*
- *Some topics [unspecified] were not approached deeply enough because of lack of time.*
- *More time for discussion in plenary session is needed.*
- *The time for discussing the Strategic Document in the Parallel Sessions was not enough. It would be necessary to find time for discussing the Steering Teams.*

General comments about EpiSouth

- *Adopt new procedures to ensure involvement/ commitment/ compliance of countries with EpiSouth Network activities/objectives.*
- *I consider important to continue collaborating with all members of EpiSouth.*
- *It is important for all EpiSouth countries to continue to be involved in the project and the Network.*

The results of the questionnaire showed how participants felt about key aspects of the Sofia gathering and were used to improve EpiSouth following meetings management. The following remarks and suggestions go over positive and improvable aspects and make

explicit some changes that were adopted in the preparation and running of the following encounter.

Most answers provided by participants reflected positive attitudes and disapproving responses were exceptional; in fact, on the overall, scores were better than those recorded during the two previous general meetings. Specifically, the answers to the questionnaire led us to conclude that the meeting goals and agenda were clear and appropriate to the current stage: 94% felt that the goals were clearly explained and only 6% had some doubts about this. Although 26% stated that some important topics were not covered, nobody mentioned even a single issue left out from the agenda. Time dedicated to various topics was reasonable and depth of discussion appropriate.

The meeting process analysis showed that key roles of facilitator, leader, recorder and participants were sufficiently differentiated to allow participation, productivity and protection of the group members. Decision-making criteria were understood and acceptable by 85% of participants and nobody saw a real problem in this aspect. The same percentage considered the discussion as quite straight. Like in Athens one third thought decisions were taken before the meeting, another third felt the opposite and the other third was uncertain. Still these figures represented a progress compared to the Rome meeting. 97% of participants felt facilitators managed the meeting smoothly. 100% agreed (76% totally agreed) that every participants had a real chance to participate and 88% thought that the facilitators were able to manage the meeting impartially.

94% of participants thought that the project leader led the group to concentrate on joint tasks, without imposing decisions and timing; a slightly lower percentage (85%) thought that the leader managed to conclude the process with specific resolutions.

There was no recorder (somebody writing down key ideas on a large sheet of paper visible to all) during the general sessions of the third meeting but notes from small group discussions were deemed accurate. No memo was prepared immediately after the sessions.

Still just more than half (53%) knew others' contribution to EpiSouth (15% were confused on this issue). 74% had confidence about others' commitment toward decisions (63% and

38% at previous meetings); the fact that only one participant questioned the latter point represented an important achievement. 76% (two thirds in Athens) felt that the tone of the meeting was trusting and considerate. 74% (80% in Athens) of participants believed that evident decisions were taken and tasks assigned. 88% of participants perceived the meeting as something significant, useful, interesting; this represented an improvement compared to such overall appraisal in Athens and Rome (76 and 67% respectively).

In conclusion, this questionnaire represented a simple management tool to monitor how general meetings' participants judged some important structure (e.g. meeting agenda), process (e.g. participation and decision-making) and outcome (e.g. clear and specific resolutions and calls for action at the meeting conclusion) dimensions. It represented a quick and easily applied method, like taking a patient's pulse. Though not a scientific undertaking, still it was much better than just walking around or listening only to those who voice their concerns or approval.

Compared to the first two meetings, participants showed better assessment on many dimensions investigated by the questionnaire, from decision-making criteria to participation, confidence in others' level of commitment and finally interest about the meeting.

Therefore, the third meeting was adequately prepared and managed, stimulated participants and brought about specific decisions. This interpretation was supported by the answers to the questionnaire concerning Network building.

3. EpiSouth Network Development monitoring

As previously reported, during each of the four EpiSouth Project Meeting (Rome 2007, Athens 2007, Sofia 2009, Rome 2010) the questionnaire investigating key aspects of Network development was distributed among the participants.

The results of the analysis have been described and discussed in three reports:

- i) Monitoring Tool of Network Development: results from the questionnaire distributed during the First and the Second Project Meetings -*EpiSouth Report 3/2008*
- ii) Monitoring Tool of Network Development: results from the questionnaire distributed during the Third Project Meeting- in *Monitoring Report (October 2006- March 2009) - EpiSouth Report 8/2009*
- iii) Monitoring Tool of Network Development: results from the questionnaire distributed during the Fourth Project Meeting (Rome, 20th April 2010) – in *Final Evaluation Report EpiSouth Report 12/2010*

Here after only the conclusions and recommendations of the i) and ii) have been reported (please refer to the comprehensive available reports for further details), while the iii) is fully reported.

Rome and Athens Meetings

From the answers to the questionnaire submitted in Athens we can infer that, nine months after the project first meeting, the Network is in good shape and its potential strong. In fact, the answers of EpiSouth members to this questionnaire are, on the whole, positive and more than that represent an improvement to the opinions expressed in Rome. Only a minority of participants gave negative or pessimistic responses. More specifically, four out of five participants, even more for some characteristic, have a good or excellent understanding of the Network purpose, think that goals were not pushed by a restricted group, feedback is valuable and offered through effective instruments, help for individuals is robust, cohesion and work on relationship are effective and the potential for innovative growth is clear. Around 70% feel that their membership is established, communication is direct, members' skills are well used and conflicts are dealt with openly. About half of participants thought that influence on decisions is widespread and risk taking is promoted. Six out of ten believe leadership is distributed, whereas only one out of ten think influence and leadership are restricted.

Again, similarly to the conclusion we reached on the basis of the previous meeting answers, the opinions expressed by the Athens meeting respondents show that common ground is being built on which EpiSouth Network development can be further advanced. In order to fully grasp the opportunities offered by such a positive beginning, EpiSouth leader,

WP managers and country Focal Points should strengthen solid dimensions and work on sorting out weaknesses.

At this stage in the evolution of EpiSouth, it is essential to translate the enthusiasm and high expectations into focused energy capable to keep the project going and overcome the obstacles intrinsic in any implementation phase. In particular, it is crucial to focus the project on content. This means to ensure that vertical packages carry out their tasks with the thorough support of horizontal packages and the coordinated cooperation of each involved group and individual. Progress in completing the activities included in the annual work plans should be monitored and constructive decisions taken accordingly, before delays become failures.

Furthermore, in order to ensure that all participants become full members of the Network, individuals who do not feel included yet and the reasons behind their feeling of separation should be identified and responded to. Wide consultations before major decisions are made can contribute to spread out influence on decisions and leadership. Pending concerns and disagreements should also be dealt with openly in occasion of vertical packages and overall meetings. Meetings time management should improve so that more space for discussion on substantive topics becomes available. Risk taking within each WP should be encouraged within the project mandate and agreed strategies.

Sofia meeting

On the whole, answers of EpiSouth members to the questionnaire are positive and sceptical responses are rare. More specifically, comprehension of the Network 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.

Rome meeting

As during the previous three EpiSouth Project Meetings, the questionnaire investigating key aspects of Network development was distributed among the participants to the concluding meeting held in Rome immediately before the EpiSouth Conference on Communicable Diseases and Public Health in Mediterranean and Balkans.

24 participants out of 58, i.e. 41% (52%, 57% and 37% in Sophia, Athens and opening meeting in Rome, respectively) completed the questionnaire answering most questions. The analysis does not distinguish between EpiSouth members and external participants, different professional backgrounds nor geographical areas, because some did not specify these aspects while compiling the questionnaire.

In order to make sense of the results of this questionnaire and compare them with previous findings, it is crucial to emphasize that participants' composition to this final meeting was rather different from the previous ones, which were mostly attended by EpiSouth members. This is mainly for three reasons which will be addressed also in the discussion: first, the volcano cloud covering much of Europe around the meeting dates, some EpiSouth members were participating in video-conference, some delayed and were able to participate only in the EpiSouth Conference: in these cases the questionnaires were not filled out; second, given the ceremonial aspect inherent to a final meeting, several participants represented the institutions to which FPs belong but had not been directly involved in the project implementation; third, some external participants were invited and attended the final meeting as candidates to participate to the next phase of the project but they had never been involved before in the project activities. Specifically, 34 out of 58 participants were Focal Points (FPs) while the remaining 24 were substitutes or external participants.

The following part of the document shows the frequency and percentage for each possible answer to the 15 questions posed through the questionnaire. The numbers in bold and those in brackets indicate the frequency and percentage, respectively [e.g. 11 (46%) answered "I'm clear" to first question]. Each question is followed by a short comment on the observed results, while the conclusions attempt to give a general interpretation. In interpreting the results, ranks 4 and 5 have been considered as a "positive" outcome while answers 1 and 2 have been considered as a "negative" one.

Questionnaire

1. Network's purpose

- 1: *I'm uncertain* **0** (0%)
- 2: **1** (4%)
- 3: **4** (17%)
- 4: **8** (33%)
- 5: *I'm clear* **11** (46%)

79% of respondents (87, 85 and 86% in Sophia, Athens and Rome, respectively) have a clear understanding of the Network purpose. Only one (4%) has still some doubts, hopefully a newcomer.

2. Network's goals

- 1: *Set from above* **0** (0%)
- 2: **0** (0%)
- 3: **3** (12%)
- 4: **16** (67%)
- 5: *Emerged through interaction* **5** (21%)

Similarly to the two previous meetings (81 and 83% in Sophia and Athens, respectively), the great majority (88%) of respondents think that EpiSouth goals were set in a participatory fashion, a clear improvement compared to the project beginning in Rome (68%). 12% are convinced that such goals result from a mix of interaction and up-bottom approaches. Nobody believes that goals were forcefully imposed on participants.

3. Network's membership

- 1: *I'm out* **1** (4%)
- 2: **1** (4%)
- 3: **3** (13%)
- 4: **8** (35%)
- 5: *I'm in* **10** (43%)

78% of respondents (77, 72 and 83% in previous meetings) are convinced they are full members of the Network. Still 8% feel they do not belong, possibly because of the particular characteristics of participants to this final meeting.

4. Communication

- 1: *Very cautious* **0** (0%)
- 2: **2** (8%)
- 3: **8** (33%)
- 4: **11** (46%)
- 5: *Very open* **3** (13%)

59% of respondents (68, 56 and 75% in previous meetings) think that communication is direct, frank; no one perceives it as exaggeratedly guarded.

5. Mechanisms for getting feedback

- 1: *Poor* **0** (0%)
- 2: **1** (4%)
- 3: **11** (46%)
- 4: **11** (46%)
- 5: *Excellent* **1** (4%)

50% (55, 77 and 82% in previous meetings) think that feedback procedures are working properly. This is one of the topics investigated where the score was worse compared to previous meetings. Probably the increasing number of diverse participants including professionals external to EpiSouth explains this finding. Moreover, it should be also considered that the unexpected rapidity and entity of the network enlargement, could have caused gaps in providing appropriate feedbacks to the partners.

6. Useful feedback

- 1: *Very little* **0** (0%)
- 2: **2** (8%)
- 3: **10** (42%)
- 4: **11** (46%)
- 5: *Considerable* **1** (4%)

50% (68, 65 and 84% in previous meetings) are convinced that feedback is helpful. Again this figure is lower than that previously registered. The same above explanation might apply here.

7. Use of Network member's skills

- 1: *Poor use* **0** (0%)
- 2: **3** (13%)
- 3: **11** (48%)
- 4: **6** (26%)
- 5: *Good use* **3** (13%)

39% (67, 70 and 68% in previous meetings) believe that involvement in the Network makes use of their capacities. Half are undecided and 13% feel that their skills are under-used. This is one of the topic where opinions differ mostly and this can be interpreted as a sign of some split between fully and moderately engaged participants.

8. Support

- 1: *Little help for individuals* **0** (0%)

- 2: **2** (11%)
- 3: **10** (53%)
- 4: **5** (26%)
- 5: *Strong support for individuals 2* (11%)

Only 37% (62, 83 and 55% in previous meetings) think that the project atmosphere provides significant help to members. Again about half are unsure. Like the previous three answers, this result can be explained by the fact that the final meeting was not meant to provide support to EpiSouth members and several invitees were not full members.

9. Working on relationships with others

- 1: *Little effort 1* (4%)
- 2: **2** (9%)
- 3: **6** (23%)
- 4: **8** (26%)
- 5: *High level of effort 6* (23%)

49% (65, 70 and 80% in previous meetings) feel that the relationship dimension is carefully dealt with by participants. The lower percentage compared with previous meetings could be explained by the relatively higher proportion of new or external participants, who are not yet in close relationships with the project members.

10. Cohesion

- 1: *Low 0* (0%)
- 2: **0** (0%)
- 3: **11** (50%)
- 4: **7** (32%)
- 5: *Optimal 4* (18%)

40% (63, 52 and 78% in previous meetings) of respondents feel that cohesion is solid. None perceived trouble in this regard. Most respondents were uncertain probably reflecting the fact that some of them are new or external participants.

11. Conflict

- 1: *Difficult issues are avoided 1* (4%)
- 2: **2** (9%)
- 3: **10** (43%)
- 4: **6** (26%)
- 5: *Problems are discussed openly and constructively 4* (17%)

43% (71, 68 and 65% in the previous meetings) are convinced that disagreements are tackled overtly and effectively. As above, most respondents were uncertain probably

reflecting the fact that some of them are new or external participants no previously involved in the project dynamics.

12. Influence on decisions

- 1: *By few members* **1** (4%)
- 2: **4** (17%)
- 3: **11** (48%)
- 4: **6** (26%)
- 5: *By all members* **1** (4%)

About one third of participants think that control over decisions belongs to all members compared with above half in the previous meetings. 21% (19, 9 and 18% in previous meetings) are still convinced that power within the Network belongs to a restricted group, while about half of respondents are uncertain probably reflecting their poor or recent involvement in the project activities.

13. Distribution of leadership

- 1: *Limited* **2** (9%)
- 2: **2** (9%)
- 3: **9** (39%)
- 4: **9** (39%)
- 5: *Shared* **1** (4%)

43% (45, 65 and 61% in previous meetings) believe that leadership distribution is balanced among members.

14. Capacity for creativity and growth

- 1: *Low* **0** (0%)
- 2: **3** (13%)
- 3: **6** (26%)
- 4: **9** (39%)
- 5: *High* **5** (22%)

61% (74, 70 and 80% in previous meetings) see big chances for ingenuity and advancement within the Network.

15. Risk taking

- 1: *Not encouraged* **0** (0%)
- 2: **3** (14%)
- 3: **10** (45%)
- 4: **6** (27%)
- 5: *Encouraged and supported* **3** (14%)

41% (61, 39 and 54% in previous meetings) feel that risk taking is promoted.

Participants also offered some comments, as follows:

- I think that there are many aspects to be improved: mechanism for getting feedback, the platform and forum,
- Other health threats, such as environmental, nosocomial infection, climate changes, not only communicable diseases should be included,
- The Network is extremely interesting in what it has achieved and the potential it has for the future, notwithstanding political issues that keep being raised and governance.

Discussion

Unfortunately, as we said in the introduction, the limit of this last round of the Networking Building Evaluation Process is to be unable to clearly distinguish between answers provided by full EpiSouth members (Focal Points) and participants not part of core activities, because only 17 respondents identified themselves as network members (full members).

This aspect would have been crucial for the interpretation of the results in this round, considering that, as anticipated, the participants' composition to this final meeting was rather different from the previous ones, which were mostly attended by EpiSouth members.

However, comparing the answers of the group of full members with those provided by them in the other evaluation rounds, we noticed that the full members continue to have a clear understanding about EpiSouth goals, a strong conviction about their membership and about the high degree of openness of internal communication. Instead, as already outlined by the answers of the last round, the appropriateness of the feedback and its usefulness and the use of members skills did not fully convinced the group.

This unprecedented participants' composition is due mainly to the already reported circumstances: first, the cloud caused by the volcano eruption in Island around the meeting dates. In fact, some EpiSouth members were participating in video-conference, some delayed and were able to participate only in the EpiSouth Conference: in these cases the questionnaires were not filled out.

Secondly, contrary to previous meetings, some EpiSouth countries were represented not only by their respective Focal Points but also by experts in fields relevant to the project and by representatives of institutions supporting the initiative.

Finally, other Institutions/Entities from the EpiSouth Countries were invited to explore possible future collaborations in the new phase of the Project.

All the above might have prevented the close connection that group members felt during previous meetings.

It might be also an issue the fact that the Meeting in Rome brought the Project EpiSouth to a close and the new Project EpiSouth Plus to its starting. This fact inevitably goes together with new challenges, uncertainty about the future prospect of the network and the role each institution and individual will play in the new phase of the initiative. Nevertheless the achievements, both in network building activities and in substantive work, represent solid foundations from which it will be possible to make further progress during the new project.

Conclusions

On the whole, answers of EpiSouth members to the questionnaire were positive and sceptical responses not frequent. More specifically, comprehension of the Network purpose was very good, most participants believed that goals were not forced by a small group, their membership was consolidated and communication sufficiently straightforward. However less than half of the participants considered the tools for feedback within the project, use of and support for members' skills, relationships with others, conflict management, chance for risk taking, and distribution of influence on decisions as fully appropriate.

4. Work Packages Monitoring (WP1-WP5 and WP6-WP8 on-line questionnaires)

With the aim to assess EpiSouth management and content related activities through the eyes of participants, two questionnaires (**Annexes 3 and 4**) were designed and uploaded

in the project web site to allow on line compilation to the project Focal Points (FPs) in two occasions, i.e. before the Sofia meeting (2009) and before the project closure (2010). For both instruments, a 5-points Likert scale was used, from completely disagree, corresponding to a minimum score of 1, to completely agree, i.e. a grade of 5.

4.1 First Round (June 2008- March 2009)

The set of questions regarding project management (WP1-5) was developed during the summer '08 and in the first round 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 (WP6-WP8), was forwarded during the winter '09; the response rate was 31% including FPs from 11 nations out of 26.

WP1-WP5 Monitoring

This 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 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.

WP6-WP8 Monitoring

- Cross border epidemic intelligence (WP6)
- Vaccine preventable diseases and migrant populations (WP7)
- Epidemiology and preparedness to cross border zoonotic infections (WP8)

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

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).

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 and 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.
- 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 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.

4.2 Second Round (January- June 2010)

WP1-WP5 Monitoring

The first set of questions, concerning project's management and training activities (WP1-5), got a response rate of 31% (19 out of 61), less than the previous one of 43%. All respondents answered all questions, therefore the denominator is always 19. We do not know why less than one third of the questionnaires were filled out and how far the answers are representative of overall opinions. Nevertheless, participants from all regions, representing 15 countries (Bosnia-Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Egypt, France, Greece, Italy, Jordan, Malta, Palestine, Romania, Serbia, Spain, Tunisia, Turkey) out of the 26 involved, provided answers, and this gives us some confidence about their worth.

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

COMMUNICATION

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

Distribution of values

1: Totally disagree 0

2: 0

3: 2 (11%)

4: 15 (79%)

5: Totally agree 2 (11%)

Mean: 4

2. The Network has improved exchange of information regarding Communicable Diseases among most EpiSouth participating countries

1: Totally disagree 0
2: 0
3: 1 (5%)
4: 14 (74%)
5: Totally agree 4 (21%)

Mean: 4,2

Participants consider EpiSouth contribution to communication as positive both within their region and, even more so, on the whole area covered by the project. Sharing information represents a precondition for common action and is also a necessary feature of a network. Besides, both scores show progress compared to previous results (3.9 for both).

COORDINATED RESPONSES

3. The Network has improved coordinated responses to Communicable Diseases threats in the area where I work (e.g. Balkans, Middle East, Northern Africa, Southern Europe)

1: Totally disagree 1 (5%)
2: 1 (5%)
3: 11 (58%)
4: 6 (32%)
5: Totally agree 0

Mean: 3,2

4. The Network has improved coordinated responses to Communicable Diseases threats in most of the Mediterranean area

1: Totally disagree 0
2: 2 (11%)
3: 8 (42%)
4: 8 (42%)
5: Totally agree 1 (5%)

Mean: 3,4

Not unexpectedly the lowest scores recorded concern the Network contribution toward improving coordinated responses to Communicable Diseases threats within each involved area (3,2) and in most of the Mediterranean area (3,4). At present, harmonized activities in the field of Communicable Diseases control can only represent an ideal and rather remote goal for the Mediterranean area. Nevertheless such scores are encouraging and

presumably show that participants think the project has contributed to shorten the trip toward that crucial point. Former results were equal to 3.2 for both questions; therefore we observe an improvement in terms of perception of coordinated responses to hazards.

COMMON POLICIES

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

1: Totally disagree 0
2: 0
3: 4 (21%)
4: 11 (58%)
5: Totally agree 4 (21%)

Mean: 4

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

1: Totally disagree 0
2: 2 (11%)
3: 1 (5%)
4: 9 (47%)
5: Totally agree 7 (37%)

Mean: 4,1

Answers to questions 5 and 6 reveal that EpiSouth has been successful in raising understanding about the importance of harmonizing strategic approaches to infectious diseases surveillance and control not only among neighboring nations but in the whole region.

This represents a key accomplishment of the project, which has first drawn attention to widespread different approaches to infectious diseases control in nations belonging to the Mediterranean area and, secondly, to the need of designing integrated evidence-based systems and structures instead of depending on established traditions. Inevitably, redesigning and improving surveillance systems taking into account their integration into a broader system represents a major challenge implying a long term commitment by international, national and local institutions and professionals.

The fact that previous scores for both queries were equal to 4.3 might suggest that recognition of the necessity to design common strategies was reached earlier during EpiSouth implementation and simply did not progress further.

OVERALL PROGRESS

7. My institution's participation to EpiSouth has contributed to improvements in the Communicable Diseases Surveillance System of my country

1: Totally disagree 0
2: 1 (5%)
3: 8 (42%)
4: 9 (47%)
5: Totally agree 1 (5%)

Mean: 3,5

8. The Network has represented an important progress in Communicable Diseases Surveillance in most of the Mediterranean area

1: Totally disagree 0
2: 0
3: 6 (32%)
4: 12 (63%)
5: Totally agree 1 (5%)

Mean: 3,7

9. The Network has contributed towards building reliable and collaborative relationships among public health professionals in most of the Mediterranean area

1: Totally disagree 0
2: 0
3: 4 (21%)
4: 8 (42%)
5: Totally agree 7 (37%)

Mean: 4,2

Respondents are convinced that EpiSouth has somewhat improved Surveillance Systems within their own countries (3,5) and in the Mediterranean area (3,7), although such goals were not part of the project core. The grade to question 9 (4,2) 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

attainment because it represents EpiSouth reason of being and the premise of all its other objectives. As far as questions 7 and 8 are concerned, tallies were higher than the preceding ones (3.4 and 3.5 respectively). On the contrary, a gap (equal to 0.4) exists in relation to advancing professional ties in the Mediterranean; still current finding (4.2) represent a very encouraging outcome, in fact the best one among replies concerning technical topics.

PROJECT MANAGEMENT

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

1: Totally disagree 0
2: 1 (5%)
3: 3 (16%)
4: 5 (26%)
5: Totally agree 10 (53%)

Mean: 4,3

11. The website and the electronic bulletin have represented effective communication tools for EpiSouth partners and beyond (WP2)

1: Totally disagree 0
2: 0
3: 2 (11%)
4: 7 (37%)
5: Totally agree 10 (53%)

Mean: 4,4

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

1: *Totally disagree* 0
2: 1 (5%)
3: 5 (26%)
4: 9 (47%)
5: *Totally agree* 4 (21%)

Mean: 3,8

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

1: *Totally disagree* 0
2: 0
3: 4 (21%)
4: 9 (47%)
5: *Totally agree* 6 (32%)

Mean: 4,1

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

1: *Totally disagree* 0
2: 0
3: 0
4: 10 (53%)
5: *Totally agree* 9 (47%)

Mean: 4,5

Respondents consider project management as constructive and dependable (4,3) and think other cross-sectional activities, in particular communication (4,4) and networking (4,1) have contributed positively to its performance. As far as training is concerned, satisfaction among participants was excellent (4,5).

OVERALL ADDED VALUE

15. My institution's involvement in the EpiSouth Network building has been a worthwhile effort

1: *Totally disagree* 0
2: 0
3: 2 (11%)
4: 10 (53%)
5: *Totally agree* 7 (37%)

Mean: 4,3

16. The EpiSouth Network building has been a worthwhile effort for my country

1: *Totally disagree* 0
2: 0
3: 3 (16%)
4: 10 (53%)
5: *Totally agree* 6 (32%)

Mean: 4,2

Participants are convinced that being part of EpiSouth has represented an important opportunity especially for the organization they work for (4,3) and, more in general, for their nation (4,2). No respondent disagree on these two points.

Most scores to the last on-line questions regarding project management are somewhat lower than those recorded one year earlier. The largest differences concern responses about project management effectiveness and transparency (4,3 vs 4,7) and monitoring activities (3,8 vs 4,2). However most recent results are still very satisfactory, because not only none of them is below the mean, which would be considered insufficient, but are all above 4 except one ².

Some respondents also added a few comments which are included in the following lines. Most are supportive of the project, confirming the answers to the above closed questions, and some offer a few suggestions on how to further improve the initiative.

- *Though we have joint this network later on we feel it is paramount in its vision. I do believe that we need more commitment to the activities of the network between member states so as to optimize and reap a productive output. An important strategy is enhancing the collaboration with the different organizations involved in infectious disease surveillance.*
- *The Episouth Project facilitated the close collaboration and information exchange between the public health officials.*
- *Not only surveillance units and technical institutes but also Preparedness and Response units should be involved in the project in order to make effective coordinated actions to CD threats. I feel we have not yet found the appropriate communication tools or existing ones are well known by potential users. The coordination team have done a very good and high quality work. Congratulations.*
- *The 2009 A(H1N1) pandemic has been a good illustration and exercise for the EpiSouth network in terms of information sharing, for the awareness improvement of needs in terms of communicable diseases.*
- *Improve the active participation of countries in the network in a continuous manner.*

² Other current scores compared to those recorded one year ago are as follows: "Website and electronic bulletin as effective communication tool" 4,4 vs 4,3; "Networking activities and development of contacts" 4,1 vs 4,3; "value of EpiSouth network building for own institution" 4,3 vs 4,6; "value of EpiSouth network building for own country" 4,2 vs 4,4.

- *More meeting and sharing experiences and tools between members on line chatting as well as brainstorming for its progress.*

WP6-WP8 Monitoring

- Cross border epidemic intelligence (WP6)
- Vaccine preventable diseases and migrant populations (WP7)
- Epidemiology and preparedness to cross border zoonotic infections (WP8)

For the second questionnaire, concerning vertical packages, the response rate was 23% (14 out of 61), compared to the earlier 31%, and included FPs from 11 nations (Bosnia-Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Cyprus, France, Greece, Italy, Jordan, Malta, Palestine, Romania, Serbia) out of 26. Not all respondents answered all questions because not all were involved in every WP, therefore the denominator varies, i.e. it is less than 14 for questions 4, 8 and 12. This questionnaire concerned central aspects of each technical package, excluding training which was briefly considered in the context of the questionnaire concerning WP1-WP5; statements and relative scores were as follows.

EPIDEMIC INTELLIGENCE

1. The e-web weekly bulletin has enhanced and qualified information sharing about public health threats at international and regional (EpiSouth) levels

1: *Totally disagree* 0
 2: 0
 3: 1 (7%)
 4: 5 (36%)
 5: *Totally agree* 8 (57%)

Mean: 4,5 (4,3 in 2009)

2. The Members Area in EpiSouth website dedicated to the WP6 (WP6 STWA and WP6 ENWA) has facilitated information and project's documents sharing and enhanced work's efficiency

1: *Totally disagree* 0
 2: 0
 3: 2 (14%)
 4: 8 (57%)
 5: *Totally agree* 4 (29%)

Mean: 4,1 (4,3 in 2009)

3. The strategic document on cross-border epidemic intelligence will contribute toward improving the integration of surveillance systems in the EpiSouth area

1: *Totally disagree* 0
2: 0
3: 3 (21%)
4: 6 (43%)
5: *Totally agree* 5 (36%)

Mean: 4,1 (4,3 in 2009)

4. The WP6 Steering Team has facilitated collaboration among countries, enhancing views sharing and ensuring exchange of tools, experiences and results (only for WP6ST Members)

1: *Totally disagree* 1 (13%)
2: 0
3: 1 (13%)
4: 2 (26%)
5: *Totally agree* 4 (50%)

Mean: 3,9 (4,3 in 2009)

As far as Epidemic Intelligence is concerned, respondents especially value the e-web weekly bulletin (4,5) as a tool which “has enhanced and qualified information sharing about public health threats at international and regional (EpiSouth) levels”. They also appreciate both this WP Members Area (4,1) as a useful instrument of information exchange, and its output in the form of the Strategic Document (4,1).

IMMUNIZATION OF MIGRANT POPULATIONS

5. The within-country and inter-countries collaborative work on the WP "Vaccine preventable diseases and migrant populations" has facilitated the establishment of an informal network of experts involved in VPD surveillance, prevention and control in participating countries

1: *Totally disagree* 0
2: 1 (7%)
3: 3 (21%)
4: 6 (43%)
5: *Totally agree* 4 (50%)

Mean: 3,9 (4 in 2009)

6. *The Members Area in EpiSouth website dedicated to WP7 (WP7 STWA and WP7 ENWA) has facilitated information and documents sharing and enhanced work's efficiency*

1: *Totally disagree* 0
2: 3 (21%)
3: 5 (36%)
4: 4 (29%)
5: *Totally agree* 2 (14%)

Mean: 3,4 (3,8 in 2009)

7. The strategic document on Vaccine preventable diseases and migrant population will contribute to a better integration of policies, strategies and programs aimed at improving the access of migrant populations to immunization within and across participating countries

1: *Totally disagree* 0
2: 1 (7%)
3: 2 (14%)
4: 7 (50%)
5: *Totally agree* 4 (29%)

Mean: 4 (4,3 in 2009)

8. The WP7 Steering Team has facilitated collaboration among countries, enhancing views sharing and ensuring exchange of tools, experiences and results (only for WP7ST Members)

1: *Totally disagree* 0
2: 0
3: 0
4: 5 (83%)
5: *Totally agree* 1 (17%)

Mean: 4,2 (4,7 in 2009)

Respondents consider the tools adopted, particularly the Steering Team (4,2), and the products delivered by WP7, specially the strategic document (4), as worthwhile contributions toward a more effective and systematic approach to migrant populations' limited vaccine coverage.

ZOONOSIS

9. The Directory of human (HPH) and veterinary public health (VPH) contact points for the selected priority diseases represents an useful tool for communicating among HPH and VPH officials

1: *Totally disagree* 0
2: 1 (7%)
3: 1 (7%)
4: 6 (43%)
5: *Totally agree* 6 (43%)

Mean: 4,2 (4 in 2009)

10. The Members Area in EpiSouth website dedicated to the WP8 (WP8 STWA and WP8 ENWA) has facilitated information and documents sharing and enhanced the work's efficiency

1: *Totally disagree* 0
2: 3 (21%)
3: 2 (14%)
4: 7 (50%)
5: *Totally agree* 2 (14%)

Mean: 3,6 (4 in 2009)

11. The strategic document on risk assessment methods for cross border transmission of zoonoses will represent a contribution toward the integration of surveillance strategies and coordinated response across participating countries

1: *Totally disagree* 0
2: 0
3: 3 (21%)
4: 8 (57%)
5: *Totally agree* 3 (21%)

Mean: 4 (4,2 in 2009)

12. The WP8 Steering Team has facilitated collaboration among countries, enhancing views sharing and ensuring exchange of tools, experiences and results (only for WP8ST Members)

1: *Totally disagree* 0
2: 0
3: 1 (13%)
4: 4 (50%)
5: *Totally agree* 3 (37%)

Mean: 4,3 (4,2 in 2009)

Respondents express appreciation for the products delivered by WP8, in particular the Directory of human (HPH) and veterinary public health (VPH) contact points (4,2) and the strategic document (4), as important steps toward collaboration and integration of analysis and strategies.

13. The WPs Steering Teams have facilitated collaboration among countries, enhancing views sharing and ensuring exchange of tools, experiences and results (for all EpiSouth Focal Points)

1: *Totally disagree* 0

2: 0

3: 0

4: 7 (50%)

5: *Totally agree* 7 (50%)

Mean: 4,5 (4,0 in 2009)

The managerial approach consisting of Steering Teams has very satisfactorily (4,5) responded to participants need for face-to-face communication and strengthened partnership among institutions and individuals.

Some respondents also offered a few comments which appear in the following lines. All observations are supportive of this initiative and some include recommendations for future work.

- *The development of the cross border intelligence was consistent with the emerging needs of such activities. What we need is to have more plans on preparedness for emerging infectious diseases and events which may jeopardize the world's human interaction. The Iceland Volcano makes imperative to include environmental insults as a component of our intelligence system and countries should be accountable for that.*
- *The work was done very professionally, has helped strengthen ties between the different regions and is very relevant to today's situation where it is vital to obtain information quickly and accurately. It should be deemed to be of great importance for the future to have such collaboration between all the countries.*
- *Strengthen collaboration between IHR & WP6, training other members on how to build the e-bulletin*
- *Exchange the experiences with countries with high coverage rates of immunization*

- *The importance of establishing a guide to be used as reference for relevant situation is important. The other important action is to advocate for vaccine identity card and to encourage all countries to raise awareness regarding populations vaccine records and personal vaccine cards.*
- *This package has highlighted how big and different the problem of migrant populations is in different countries. It should be considered as the stepping stone to try further develop common strategies to deal with the problems associated with vaccination of migrant populations and the transfer of communicable disease across borders.*
- *Many member states are lacking behind in knowing how to manage zoonotic disease starting from identification ending to proper management. Therefore having an accessible laboratories and training health personnel in the field will add value to the project.*
- *The directory will certainly be an important tool and facilitate collaboration between countries making it easier to access the right contact points.*
- *Epidemiology and preparedness to Cross Border Zoonotic Infections has been developed via the HPH - VPH experts and officials participating in the Steering Team multiple activities, questionnaires' generation and reporting of their findings in annexes I, II, III, IV of the Strategic Document. Also the Vertical Sessions established criteria for emergence.*

Conclusion

Similarly to previously filled monitoring tools, all examined dimensions within each WPs have responded more than properly to members' expectations, including functioning of the WP6, 7 and 8 Steering Teams. Respondents think that the EpiSouth network has been managed effectively showing also consideration toward participant individuals and organizations.

The fact that several scores show marginally lower values compared to the similar investigation carried out one year earlier is possibly due to EpiSouth conclusion together

with the uncertainty regarding the new phase of the project, which might have brought a sort of detachment among participants. Disconnection from an initiative coming to its conclusion constitutes a normal reaction among participants. The beginning of the new phase should take this into account clarifying as soon as possible project goals and strategies and partners' roles, striving at the same time to focus everybody's effort on subject matters.

Response rates were low, i.e. one third and one fourth, respectively, and down in this round compared to the previous one. Such poorer response rates might have biased the answers. However, most recent grades are still very positive and none of them is even near to the mean. Indeed the scores of these and several other investigations carried out during its implementation, reveal that EpiSouth is a successful initiative.

The most important indication of such accomplishment does not come from the perceptions of participants, but the much larger than anticipated number of countries and institutions which have joined the EpiSouth Network.

In fact, this initiative currently represents the most representative assembly of professionals working in countries of the Mediterranean and Balkan regions in any technical field. Even though participants have substantially different economic and cultural backgrounds, and in some area suffer from long lasting tensions and even harsh conflicts, the climate was very collaborative. In one sentence, the process of network building has represented a big success and bodes well for its evolution.

5. Monitoring through individual interviews and questionnaire submitted to Focal Points

Network construction and development was 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 project meeting before its concluding convention. That meeting was also an opportunity to collect information on how the EpiSouth Network had evolved that 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 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 was necessarily constrained by administrative rules, it was deemed important that EU Commission executives providing political and financial support, project managers, and members maintained a long term horizon sharing 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 participants with two aims: first to provide a feed back on what members thought and second to offer food for thought to the small groups meetings.

The professionals interviewed worked in the three vertical WPs, and were 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 were either in a rather dominant position as persons in charge of WP or played 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.

The designed set of questions for the interviews and the questionnaires, as well as the detailed answers obtained from the interviews and the questionnaires are included in ***Annex 5***.

In summary, the answers revealed that the EpiSouth Network responded to expectations of most members. In terms of process, trusting and helpful working relationships had been established but personal contacts should have been further formalized, i.e. institutionalized.

As far as content was concerned, successes were acknowledged for all vertical WPs, but sometimes they lacked focus on specific problems and solutions. At the time the suggestion was to lead participants' effort toward subject matters, offering concrete solutions relevant to countries, possibly organized through regional task forces with clear mandates and ample autonomy. At the same time, the advise was to devise guidelines concerning analysis, systems and strategies and to provide help with their implementation through ad hoc training (e-learning) and on site visits.

Concerning project management, it is deemed valid by participants, even if there were still some inevitable tension between organizations who launched the initiative and controlled

the budget and those who did not. The adoption of feasible ways to involve more deeply non-EU participants in key decisions, i.e. changing roles from information to consultation to authority, was suggested.

6. Analysis of the web site utilization

A simple analysis of the website utilization provides valuable clues about the Network's positive evolution. The number of accesses, defined as unique visitors, grew from 1.856 to 3.200 to 6.109 for the quarters from December 2007 – February 2008 to December 2008 – February 2009 and to December 2009 – February 2010. During the last year of activity, i.e. between July 2009 and June 2010, the number of total accesses amounted to almost half a million (430.000), visitors totaled 22.600 and pages visited to 84.000.

Web privacy policies make recognition of countries of origin impossible to identify for many contacts.

7. Conclusion

On the whole, answers to monitoring tools by project participants were positive, sceptical responses being rare. More specifically, comprehension of the Network purpose was excellent and most participants believed that goals were not imposed by a sub-group, perceived their membership as established and communication as sufficiently forthright. Further, members were convinced that the project provided a mutually supportive climate, conflict management was open and constructive and their autonomy in exploring solutions to problems had increased compared to earlier phases. Respondents think that the EpiSouth network has been managed effectively showing also consideration toward participant individuals and organizations. In essence, all examined dimensions within each vertical and horizontal WPs have responded more than properly to members' expectations.

The number of countries and institutions which have joined the EpiSouth Network was much larger than anticipated. In fact, this initiative represents the most representative assembly of professionals working in countries of the Mediterranean and Balkan regions in

any technical field. Even though participants had substantially different economic and cultural backgrounds, and in some area suffered from long lasting tensions and even harsh conflicts, the climate was very collaborative. The process of network building has represented a big success and bodes well for its evolution.

EpiSouth, the only project dealing with such topics on both sides of the Mediterranean, has created a strong link between the EU and all participating countries and represents an important source of information to strengthen health security, to expand immunization among vulnerable migrants, and to detect and respond effectively to zoonosis across the Mediterranean. The first three years of the project are very promising; further success will depend on the sustained willingness of countries to contribute actively, and the ability to formalize and strengthen a balanced partnership.

ANNEXES

Annex 1

EPISOUTH MEETING EVALUATION TOOL

This short questionnaire intends to assess how our meeting evolved. The results will be used to improve the next meetings and will be available to participants through the EpiSouth website.

If you wish so, feel free to identify yourself with your name or just with the area where you come from.

Please answer the following questions, circling the score which reflects your judgment:

- *1 if you totally disagree,*
- *5 if you totally agree,*
- *the other scores reflect in-between opinions.*

AGENDA

1. Were the meeting's goals clearly explained and understood ?

Totally disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Totally agree

2. Were the topics listed in the agenda appropriate at this stage of EpiSouth ?

Totally disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Totally agree

3. Was some important topic left out of the agenda ?

Totally disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Totally agree

4. If yes which one(s)

.....
.....
.....
.....

5. Was the time allowed for the meeting balanced with the number of topics dealt with?

Totally disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Totally agree

6. Were the objectives of the meeting clearly spelled out and communicated so that participants had similar expectations ?

Totally disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Totally agree

7. Were the topics on the agenda covered with sufficient depth avoiding repetitions and waste of time ?

Totally disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Totally agree

PROCESS

8. Was there adequate differentiation of roles to insure participation, productivity and protection of group members?

Totally disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Totally agree

9. Was the atmosphere of the meeting appropriate for the occasion in terms of formality/informality ?

Totally disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Totally agree

10. Was the method of decision-making understood and acceptable ?

Totally disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Totally agree

11. Was the discussion open enough to consider different opinions and options ?

Totally disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Totally agree

12. Were the decisions which should have been debated during the meeting already made before it ?

Totally disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Totally agree

13. Was the trust level among participants high ?

Totally disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Totally agree

14. Were the presentations adequately prepared ?

Totally disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Totally agree

15. Were the presentations well delivered ?

Totally disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Totally agree

16. What, if anything, could be improved about the presentations ?

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FACILITATOR

17. Was the role of the facilitator clearly explained ?

Totally disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Totally agree

18. Was the facilitator able to keep the meeting moving along smoothly ?

Totally disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Totally agree

19. Did the facilitator talk too much ?

Totally disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Totally agree

20. Did the facilitator become defensive when criticized ?

Totally disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Totally agree

21. Did the facilitator protect group members and their ideas ?

Totally disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Totally agree

22. Did everyone have a chance to participate ?

Totally disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Totally agree

23. Was the facilitator able to remain neutral and not get involved ?

Totally disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Totally agree

24. Was the facilitator effective in bringing the group to closure and agreeing on specific action items ?

Totally disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Totally agree

LEADER

25. Was the leader capable in getting the group to focus on common tasks in an orderly fashion ?

Totally disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Totally agree

26. Did the leader refrain from dominating the meeting ?

Totally disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Totally agree

RECORDER

27. Were the role of the recorder and the importance of the group memory clearly defined at the beginning of the meeting ?

Totally disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Totally agree

28. Was the group memory legible ?

Totally disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Totally agree

29. Did the recorder capture the basic ideas of the participants ?

Totally disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Totally agree

30. Did the recorder make corrections without getting defensive ?

Totally disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Totally agree

31. Did the recorder assist the group in organizing the information that was generated ?

Totally disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Totally agree

32. Did the recorder prepare a group memo and send it out to the participants ?

Totally disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Totally agree

33. Was the memo accurate and understandable to participants ?

Totally disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Totally agree

Please add any comment you consider relevant to how the meeting evolved and what can be done to improve the next ones.

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Thank you for your time.

Annex 2

EpiSouth Network Development Monitoring Tool

This short questionnaire intends to assess how EpiSouth members feel about the Network's building progress. This survey will be distributed to the participants in a few occasions during the project's implementation in order to periodically monitor key dimensions of its advancement. The results will be used to improve the Network development and will be available to participants through the EpiSouth website.

Please declare if you are an EpiSouth member or an external participant.

EpiSouth member

External participant

If you wish so, feel free to identify yourself with your name or just with the area where you come from.

Please answer the following questions, circling the score which reflects your view:

For example, to question 1.

- answer 1 if you are totally uncertain about the Network's purpose,*
- answer 5 if you are totally clear about the Network's purpose,*
- the other scores reflect in-between opinions.*

1. Network's purpose

I'm uncertain 1 2 3 4 5 I'm clear

2. Network's goals

Set from above 1 2 3 4 5 Emerged through interaction

3. Network's membership

I'm out 1 2 3 4 5 I'm in

4. Communication

Very cautious 1 2 3 4 5 Very open

5. Mechanisms for getting feedback

Poor 1 2 3 4 5 Excellent

6. Useful feedback

Very little 1 2 3 4 5 Considerable

7. Use of Network member's skills

Poor use 1 2 3 4 5 Good use

8. Support

Little help for individuals 1 2 3 4 5 Strong support for individuals

9. Working on relationships with others

Little effort 1 2 3 4 5 High level of effort

10. Cohesions

Low 1 2 3 4 5 Optimal

11. Conflict

Difficult issues are avoided 1 2 3 4 5 Problems are discussed openly and constructively

12. Influence on decisions

By few members 1 2 3 4 5 By all members

13. Distribution of leadership

Limited 1 2 3 4 5 Shared

14. Capacity for creativity and growth

Low 1 2 3 4 5 High

15. Risk taking

Not encouraged 1 2 3 4 5 Encouraged and supported

Please add any comment you consider relevant to how the Network is evolving and what can be done to enhance its progress. Also suggest any modification to this questionnaire you consider useful (e.g. adding questions, different spelling out).

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Thank you for your time.

Annex 3

Monitoring Tool of the EpiSouth Network

Overall project and horizontal packages (WP1 to WP5)

This short questionnaire intends to assess how EpiSouth members feel about the strengths and weaknesses of the Network building. It investigates the overall project and the horizontal packages.

This tool will be distributed twice half way through the project's implementation, i.e. in March 2008 and March 2009, in order to monitor its advancement. The results will be used to report to participating countries and institutions and to EpiSouth funding source. The aim is to further enhance the Network development. Findings will be available to participants through the EpiSouth website.

Focal Point: YES; **NO**

Please state the area where you work (i.e. Southern Europe, Middle East, Northern Africa, the Balkans):

If you wish so, feel free to identify yourself also with your name and the country where you work:.....

Please answer the following questions, circling the score which reflects your judgment:

- 1 if you totally disagree,
- 5 if you totally agree,
- the other scores reflect in-between opinions.

Communication

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

Totally disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Totally agree

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

Totally disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Totally agree

Coordinated responses

3. The Network is improving coordinated responses to Communicable Diseases threats in the area where I work (e.g. Balkans, Southern Europe)

Totally disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Totally agree

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

Totally disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Totally agree

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 (e.g. Balkans, Middle East)

Totally disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Totally agree

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

Totally disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Totally agree

Overall Progress

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

Totally disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Totally agree

8. The Network represents an important progress in Communicable Diseases Surveillance in most of the Mediterranean area

Totally disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Totally agree

9. The Network contributes toward building reliable and collaborative relationships among public health professionals in most of the Mediterranean area

Totally disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Totally agree

Project Management

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

Totally disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Totally agree

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

Totally disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Totally agree

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

Totally disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Totally agree

13. The networking activities help to establish and develop contacts among participating institutions (WP4)

Totally disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Totally agree

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

Totally disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Totally agree

Overall added value

15. My institution’s involvement in the EpiSouth Network building is a worthwhile effort

Totally disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Totally agree

16. The EpiSouth Network building is a worthwhile effort for my country

Totally disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Totally agree

Please add any comment you consider relevant to how the Network has developed and what can be done to further enhance its progress in the future.

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Thank you for your time.

Annex 4

Evaluation Tool of the EpiSouth Network for:

- i) Cross border epidemic intelligence (WP6)
- ii) Vaccine preventable diseases and migrant populations (WP7)
- iii) Epidemiology and preparedness to crossborder zoonotic infections (WP8)

This short questionnaire intends to assess what EpiSouth members think about the strengths and weaknesses of the implemented activities by the Network. The present questionnaire specifically investigates the three vertical packages WP6, WP7 and WP8

This tool will be compiled on-line twice during the project's implementation, i.e. in February 2009 and February 2010 in order to monitor the advancements.

The results will be used to report to participating countries and Institutions and to EpiSouth funding Institutions. Findings will be available to participants through the EpiSouth website.

Please answer the following questions, circling the score which reflects your judgment:

- 1 if you totally disagree,
- 5 if you totally agree,
- the other scores reflect in-between opinions.

Cross border epidemic intelligence (WP6)

• **1. The assessment of existing Epidemic Intelligence related activities** in EpiSouth countries (whose results were reported in the Report EpiSouth 5/2008 "Cross-Border Epidemic Intelligence evaluation: results from the questionnaire on countries' needs and expectations") represents an opportunity to enhance their surveillance systems

• Totally disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Totally agree

•

• **2. The e-web weekly bulletin** enhances and qualifies information sharing about public health threats at international and regional (EpiSouth) levels

• Totally disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Totally agree

•

• **3. The Members Area in EpiSouth website dedicated to the WP6** (WP6 STWA and WP6 ENWA) has facilitated information and project's documents sharing and enhanced the work's efficiency

Totally disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Totally agree

4. I expect that **the strategic document on cross-border epidemic intelligence** will greatly contribute to the actual improvement in integrating surveillance systems in the EpiSouth area

Totally disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Totally agree

5. **The constitution of the WP6 Steering Team** is facilitating the collaboration of the countries, enhancing views sharing, ensuring sharable tools and outcomes (**only for WP6ST Members**)

Totally disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Totally agree

Please add any comment you consider relevant to how the Cross border epidemic intelligence package has been developed so far and what can be done to further enhance its progress in the future.

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Vaccine preventable diseases and migrant populations (WP7)

6. The report on the results obtained from the compilation of the **on-line available WP7 questionnaire** will contribute to the elucidation of the nature and dimension of the problem about the access to immunization of migrant population and immigrants

• Totally disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Totally agree

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• **7. The within-country and inter-countries collaborative work on the WP "Vaccine preventable diseases and migrant populations"** is facilitating the establishment of an informal network of experts involved in VPD surveillance, prevention and control in the countries

Totally disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Totally agree

8. **The Members Area in EpiSouth website dedicated to the WP7** (WP7 STWA and WP7 ENWA) has facilitated information and project's documents sharing and enhanced the work's efficiency

Totally disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Totally agree

•

9. I expect that **the strategic document on Vaccine preventable diseases and migrant population** will contribute to a better integration of policies, strategies and programs aimed at improving the access of migrant populations to immunization within and across participating countries

Totally disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Totally agree

10. The constitution of the WP7 Steering Team is facilitating the collaboration of the countries, enhancing views sharing, ensuring sharable tools and outcomes (**only for WP7ST Members**)

Totally disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Totally agree

Please add any comment you consider relevant to how the Vaccine preventable diseases and migrant populations package has been developed and what can be done to further enhance its progress in the future.

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Epidemiology and preparedness to cross border zoonotic infections

• **11. The zoonoses selection questionnaire** (whose results were reported in the Report EpiSouth 4/2008: “*Selection of zoonoses of priority in the Episouth countries: final report on the assessment conducted in July 2007*”) has been an useful and appropriate tool for the selection of the five zoonoses of priority for EpiSouth Network

• Totally disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Totally agree

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• **12. The Directory of human (HPH) and veterinary public health (VPH)** contact points for the selected priority diseases will represent an useful tool for communicating among HPH and VPH officials

• Totally disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Totally agree

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13. The Members Area in EpiSouth website dedicated to the WP8 (WP8 STWA and WP8 ENWA) has facilitated information and project’s documents sharing and enhanced the work’s efficiency

Totally disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Totally agree

•

14. I expect that **the strategic document** on risk assessment methods for cross border transmission of zoonoses will represent a contribution toward the integration of surveillance strategies and coordinated response across participating countries

Totally disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Totally agree

15. The constitution of the WP8 Steering Team is facilitating the collaboration of the countries, enhancing views sharing, ensuring sharable tools and outcomes (**only for WP8ST Members**)

Totally disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Totally agree

Please add any comment you consider relevant to how the **Epidemiology and preparedness to cross border zoonotic infections** has been developed and what can be done to further enhance its progress in the future.

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16. The constitution of WPs Steering Teams is facilitating the collaboration of the countries, enhancing views sharing, ensuring sharable tools and outcomes **(for all EpiSouth Focal Points)**

Totally disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Totally agree

Thank you for your time

Annex 5

Questions and Answers of the telephone interviews and questionnaires

i. Interviews and replies from Focal Points

This section shows the questions asked and verbatim details of the answers. Minor changes to the recorded answers were made trying to keep the meaning intact. Answers which appeared rather vague or unclear to the interviewers were probed during the interviews. Interviewees cannot be identified, just their EU or non-EU residence.

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.

1. Which expectations did you have when your organization joined EpiSouth?

COUNTRY	REPLIES
Non-EU	Collaboration with other countries, especially regarding infectious diseases. What I mean, when I say collaboration, not only with other institutions but also collaboration with epidemiologists in Europe.
Non-EU	No expectations.
Non-EU	I did not know. Uncertainty, I hoped it would be useful for our situation. Exchange of information.
Non-EU	Given that we live in the same context, i.e. the Mediterranean area, and some issues, such as the risk of epidemic outbreaks across the borders, are common, there is the opportunity to co-operate and exchange information with neighbouring countries.
EU	In our country there are migrant communities (gipsies); it is difficult to reach them with immunization program. The project represented an opportunity to confront this issue.
Non-EU	More involvement with WPs activities, drawing experience from other countries.
Non-EU	To have the opportunity to collaborate and share data, to gain a better knowledge of infectious diseases profile and share different experiences, approaches and methodologies used by different countries to cope with infectious diseases.
Non-EU	Improvement in Epidemic Intelligence.
Non-EU	The expected achievements were to share information among countries involving the Mediterranean and Balkans area as well as Europe.
Non-EU	Fond of working together with Mediterranean countries. Advantages from contacts for future collaboration.

2. How far has EpiSouth fulfilled those expectations?

Non-EU	Very well. Not concrete, not specific examples, but to know and to contact other colleagues.
Non-EU	Very good training.
Non-EU	It is useful because we have information about communicable diseases.
Non-EU	Expectations were not completely fulfilled. The project went through a positive start up phase which involved personal exchanges; however, a lot remains to be carried out about

	information and experiences sharing. We are in the middle of our path.
EU	We are learning on how to move forward.
Non-EU	The training package is 70% satisfactory.
Non-EU	Currently, the project is at its initial phase; at the beginning of the project the number of countries was restricted. We have not started to work together efficiently since the beginning of the project; we are coping with different traditions and cultures.
Non-EU	Some diseases are important, but not all, in a specific context – e.g., zoonotic diseases in Turkey.
Non-EU	It is more than good. All our objectives are nearly achieved. We faced several issues and achieved them as a group, in general. The expectations are for the future (more objectives are expected for the WP5). Up to now the achievement is quite good, EI bulletin is issued and training was carried out (2 courses already organized, a third one is expected in June in Madrid). Very good achievements during the training courses in Madrid. I look forward to an improvement of activities in the extension period and in the future.
Non-EU	Completely fulfilled. Another problem: many WPs, not easy for us to participate in all activities.

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 any suggestions to improve this aspect?

Non-EU	Up to now there has been 2 training courses in Madrid. Very good; I think they contribute to the epidemiologic knowledge. The weekly Bulletin is wonderful, a wonderful job. I can find interesting news in the Bulletin. I found much more problems in completing WP7 (VPD and Migrant population) and WP8 (Zoonosis) questionnaires., even though my colleague Emilia was more involved in the compilation. I think WP6 is good. No suggestions, no comments concerning this WP.
Non-EU	The Project did not not contribute in our country. Very interesting to know what other countries do. Other countries have improved awareness.
Non-EU	Yes, zoonosis, especially VET. Suggestion: specific help on specific problems, Exchange is difficult in big meetings.
Non-EU	It is not easy to reply. I benefited very much from the visit to our country by WP6. The visit was an occasion to increase awareness and illustrate our surveillance system to our partners. There are differences among countries because each country has its own needs. Harmonization of different systems is strictly necessary.
EU	Through the Bulletin we found out flu was circulating; we found out more information and ways of responding to communicable diseases. Exchange of info with ES board.
Non-EU	No discussion in detail on how to improve surveillance. Suggestions: more meetings on specific topics; share countries experiences; provide feedback on countries

	questionnaires.
Non-EU	EpiSouth is an opportunity to improve surveillance and control; the current situation requires more drive; we have the opportunity to compare experiences among countries belonging to the Network. This is an intermediate stage of the project. Suggestions: more frequent contacts, focus the Network on surveillance and specific technical topics with a view to improve national systems.
Non-EU	In some way, up to a certain extent; PHC plus Lab. units in our Ministry of Health became closer because both joined EpiSouth. The project, funded by EU, should consider coordination or integration with the European Sero-epidemiological Surveillance Network (ESEN).
Non-EU	Our country has a unique situation, i.e. training programme, EPiet programme, CDC, training programmes for Arab Board Public Health, community medicine. But the added value of the Network is the fact that you can compare situations and take part in advanced training for surveillance. Suggestions: to include non-communicable diseases, especially cardio-vascular diseases, diabetes and cancer and to have a look at disasters (a common issue in developed and developing countries).
Non-EU	Strong structure in Croatia, which did not change much after joining EpiSouth. Easier access to information from other countries, especially Northern Africa, similar to SE Network and WHO.

4. 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?

Non-EU	Bulletin is a good tool, right direction, right track.
Non-EU	Yes, very interesting.
Non-EU	Just let's continue in this way.
Non-EU	This is a fundamental issue. It is necessary to promote a smooth information exchange (this might be easier if common codes were used). A great effort is required. EpiSouth might be an added value in the prevention of epidemic risk, if countries were able to exchange some useful common data, especially the peculiar ones to Mediterranean area.
EU	I don't know. Yes, with neighbouring countries, especially Bulgaria; now we can make common decisions. Now we can discover common problems and devise solutions. Very easy to find out the information we need through Internet. Involvement in the Network was a great opportunity. EpiSouth allowed our Insitute and country to improve communication in Southern Europe and establish collaboration on VET zoonosis.
Non-EU	Sharing documents through Internet is OK, no clear agenda for meeting within WP5, no conference calls.

Non-EU	To devise a procedure for data sharing. Lack of feedback on questionnaires results. Suggestion: more focused topics,
Non-EU	Info exchange is good within Turkey. Ok with other countries. The website can be redesigned in the Section called StRUN. It can be simplified, reducing the steps so that people can use it at the same time.
Non-EU	Concerning data and information sharing, we have the EpiSouth platform and the weekly Bulletin, but we can develop more to share information on a regular basis, weekly, or monthly. I wish the project was able to build a more efficient and practical system by which all countries belonging to the EpiSouth Network contribute information about communicable diseases on a weekly or a monthly basis.
Non-EU	EpiSouth surely contributes to easier exchanges, especially through the Bulletin. No suggestions.

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?

Non-EU	Yes. One situation. We faced a political issue in one occasion. Nothing to suggest.
Non-EU	Yes, good.
Non-EU	Yes.
Non-EU	I think the website platform is adequate to support the Network growth. Platform management could be improved by specific paths for epidemic alert. A faster and more efficient information exchange would be advisable. I suggest, for instance, specific technical platforms.
EU	Yes, very good. Collaboration among partners must be maintained.
Non-EU	Not enough time, questionnaires should be shorter and sometimes there are technical problems in filling them out on the web. Suggestion: share data questionnaires.
Non-EU	Website platform: In my country (Algeria) there are Internet connection problems. Questionnaires compilation is not easy. Positive aspects include access to very useful documents. For instance, after the second edition of the training course in Madrid, people who did not attend the course have been able to find training material on the website platform. Communication: the Website Platform is not used as it should be. Information exchange has not occurred through the website platform up to now. Discussion forums were proposed but they are not often used as a tool for discussion
Non-EU	WP5 forum can take place twice every month at the same time.

Non-EU	Generally, yes. I am satisfied with the use of the platform.
Non-EU	Platform is well designed and useful, not used enough by us, good frequency of communication. No suggestions.

6. 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?

Non-EU	No problem, no difference.
Non-EU	Very good info communication with European countries.
Non-EU	Good chance of exchanging info.
Non-EU	This is a very delicate matter. There should not be disparities among participating countries, i.e. no first and second class countries. Visits among countries are positive; bi-lateral co-operation is useful; information exchange among countries on surveillance systems is desirable, but each country should be able to design and manage surveillance. Surveillance systems are different, therefore, it is necessary to help countries facing more difficulties to reach a minimum standard level. All countries should have the opportunity to co-operate with each other at the same level in order to respond to common problems, I am referring specifically to Epidemic Intelligence.
Non-EU	Great opportunity to involve non-European countries, they have helped, no problems in the relationship.
Non-EU	Non-EU countries are not involved as much as EU countries; there are also VISA problems. Suggestion: wider sharing of responsibilities, with the active involvement of key persons.
Non-EU	Relationships among European and non-European countries represent a delicate matter. One issue is the lack of allocated funds for non-EU countries. A further issue is the relationship among EU and non-EU countries. More time is needed to get to know each other; more interaction among participating countries is necessary. My opinion is that there is a passive attitude from non-EU countries towards EU countries, as if the first ones often were waiting for EU countries to take the initiative before acting.
Non-EU	EpiSouth pays attention to non-EU countries; e.g., training in Spain was attended by two Turkish people, very good training.
Non-EU	I think that relationships and official communication between non-European and European organizations are good. "During the three years' period we can even communicate personally". "At the beginning it was a bit conservative". Now I can communicate personally with the individuals taking part in the Network by having and sharing information concerning certain issues.
Non-EU	Good or very good, very nice being part of this Network.

7. 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 in the areas of training, epidemic intelligence, zoonosis, vaccine preventable diseases and migrants? Do you have any suggestions to improve this aspect?

Non-EU	<p>Yes, yes. Very good training. Website platform is a good tool for sharing data. Epidemic Intelligence (WP6) is the area that works very well.</p> <p>Suggestions: small technical groups on specific topics, feedback on questionnaires.</p> <p>More communication and a greater involvement of Mediterranean and Balkans areas would be desirable.</p>
Non-EU	<p>Yes, meeting with professionals.</p> <p>Suggestion: organize subject oriented meetings about zoonotic diseases, legislation on infectious diseases control in different countries.</p> <p>Structure presentations of research components showing results, conclusions and recommendations.</p>
Non-EU	<p>Yes, absolutely, too much, encouraging specific support.</p>
Non-EU	<p>EpiSouth Project is half way through. In my opinion visits among participating countries are very important together with training. In any case, a further progression of the project should be built moving away from a beginning toward a more operational phase with clear objectives and strategies.</p> <p>It is a matter of budget and time, but countries belonging to the same area, with similar systems and problems (e.g. Morocco and Tunisia, and the Balkan area) should tackle their problems together.</p>
EU	<p>Yes. Suggestions: More meetings to discuss zoonosis inside Romania, but also with other countries in the Balkans and beyond.</p>
Non-EU	<p>Sure, the Bulletin. It contains all news regarding communicable diseases, Hepatitis A epidemic, flu, and preparedness.</p>
Non-EU	<p>Considering the current situation, especially migration, it is necessary co-operate, we are forced to find common solutions. EpiSouth has the potential to give its contribution. It is necessary to focus on specific "technical" issues through a practical approach. In the field of zoonosis, for instance, some priority areas have already been identified. As for training, core curricula might be designed in accordance with specific identified needs which might then be adapted by different countries according to their needs, capabilities and resources. In this way, the Network could become more functional and would gain further development power.</p>
Non-EU	<p>EpiSouth is beyond ECDC; it is an important first step like Epi North. Suggestions: Training should be not only conducted in Spain, but also in non-EU countries such as WP6 vaccine. Each situation is difficult. Definition of migrants should be one only. SE border of Turkey stay only 2-3 days – one month – short time stay. The definition of</p>

	EpiSouth is not applicable to Turkey.
Non-EU	Actually regarding the training is OK. Concerning cross-border, epidemic intelligence and surveillance there is no sufficient comparison among countries; it is still not at level of EpiSouth. There is no preparation regarding the problem, to face with a disaster or a large outbreak. Exchange of information through the EI Bulletin is positive, but in general the exchange is not sufficient. 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.
Non-EU	Yes, good contribution; share info, To know better situation in other countries which were difficult to contact before such as Northern Africa. This is difficult from any other Networks.

8. 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?

Non-EU	OK.
Non-EU	OK.
Non-EU	Yes, no change in management.
Non-EU	In order to ensure that participating country become more involved and reliable and take more responsibilities, each geo-political area should be represented in the board. I suggest to establish a multinational Steering Committee.
EU	Yes. Steering Teams contribution was very helpful. No suggestions for improvement.
Non-EU	Do not know management rules, not enough. Clarify rules, active participation.
Non-EU	We all know that EpiSouth has originated as a European project; it is necessary for non-EU countries to be more actively involved, turn into dynamic participants and that project's ownership becomes widespread. For this reason, more communication is necessary. Also each participating country should be represented in the Steering Committees or other managerial structures in order to share decision making processes and contribute more responsibly.
Non-EU	Yes, adequate; no change suggested.
Non-EU	It is not a problem of persons, a matter of organization, because the relationship among individuals is OK. There is Bulletin for the implementation. The weak point is the implementation of the specific issues. Concerning the implementation, I suggest more specific training on management, prevention, national plans.
Non-EU	Yes, very active. No change. It should last more time to allow real use and deeper participation.

9. 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?

Non-EU	More training. More data from countries. More access to public. Other issues: Influenza epi, pandemic surveillance.
Non-EU	Training, emergent diseases, international travel health.
Non-EU	I am optimistic about EpiSouth future. After a start up phase, we need to move toward a new chapter based on logic and achievements, striving for a better integration of the group, exchange of information, visits and recommendations. In the future other major issues might be confronted.
EU	Topics are OK for the future. More priority to migrant population and VPD.
Non-EU	OK. Annual meetings. Clarify activities, measure achievements, organize courses, sharing experiences. Suggestions: same topics.
Non-EU	As far as the future is concerned, we should keep working on the same topics but in a more practical way. For instance, Epidemic Intelligence and the weekly Bulletin should be further developed. As for zoonosis, it is necessary to carry out more effective activities, moving from priority setting to a logical frame of work confronting key topics, such as conditions, laboratories, VET. Concerning VPD & Migrants, it would have been useful to identify even a single common issue on the basis of which to adopt a more dynamic stance. The important point is to focus on priorities and therefore we need to keep on working on the same topics, we have dealt with up to now without dispersing our energies.
Non-EU	WP5, 6, and 8 are OK for Turkey. Turkey is not a member of WP7. Better integration within ECDC.
Non-EU	The expectation for the future is to reach a certain common epidemiological level for disease prevention and control. People and organizations confronting and reach a sort of harmonization. No suggestions for further topics to be considered.
Non-EU	EpiSouth has a wide structure, more ambitious than EpiNorth. Difficult to grasp the opportunities offered by the Network. Topics: no new suggestions.

10. Would you like to add anything you feel would be important to discuss together with other colleagues during group interviews at the Sofia Conference ?

Non-EU	No idea about other topics. More training in statistics, help in standardize.
Non-EU	Issues discussed so far are interesting. I think that the discussion on Strategic Documents can contribute to clarify specific needs of participating countries. However, in order to progress further, we need a more structured logic.
EU	No.
Non-EU	Training techniques, pandemic preparation control in EU.
Non-EU	Nothing to add. We should keep working together on common issues, know better each other and try to collect the results of previous activities.

Non-EU	Nothing to add. Vaccine Preventable Diseases surveillance among migrants; integration with ESEN European surveillance Vaccine Preventable Diseases.
Non-EU	No. I would not like to add anything.
Non-EU	How to use the Network more? It needs time to read all Bulletins. Is Steering Committee satisfied with contribution of individual States? More activities are expected including communicable diseases such as CVDs and cancer.

ii. Questionnaires and replies from Focal Points

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