

EU CBRN Centres of Excellence

Impact on COVID-19

12/05/2020

For Public Release

How is the EU CBRN CoE contributing to fighting the COVID-19 pandemic?

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1. EU CBRN CoE Initiative

The EU CBRN Centres of Excellence Initiative is the largest European civilian external security programme, with a budget of €155 million for 2014-2020, under the Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace (IcSP); 61 partner countries are grouped into 8 Regions with Regional Secretariats, covering both close and wider neighbourhood of the EU. Since 2010, 25 projects (out of a total of 82) have focused on the biological risks, in addition to several others that have integrated it in the CBRN all hazard approach. In the current situation where COVID-19 is rapidly spreading worldwide and the number of cases is rising with increasing pace in several affected areas, there is a need for immediate targeted actions. The EU CBRN CoE has been actively responding to this emergency. Several partner countries have been reporting to have greatly benefited from the national CBRN expert network (including the CoE National Focal Points and CBRN National Teams) that were put in place thanks to the EU CBRN CoE Initiative, and that this mechanism has been found very useful to mobilize a coordinate response.

The EU CBRN Centres of Excellence are launching now (May 2020) a contract of 10 Million Euros for the LABPLUS AFRICA project directed to Institut Pasteur Dakar. 5 Million euros will be channelled to Institut Pasteur directly and 5 million euros for the fleet of mobile labs to be deployed by the Praesens Care Foundation.



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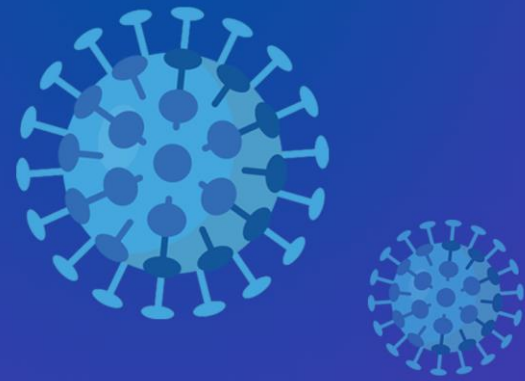
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LABPLUS AFRICA will focus on:

- Support the Response to the COVID-19 epidemic in affected countries and the preparedness in still less-affected countries in Africa through the laboratories working group network of Africa CDC, WHO AFRO and West African Health Organization;
- Establish at Institut Pasteur Dakar a world class African Centre of Excellence for Training in Surveillance and Epidemics Preparedness, Intelligence, Response and Control;
- Build an outreach capacity to provide diagnostics, sequencing, health medical (vaccination...) and non-medical (health promotion, social mobilization) services at the peripheral level of the health system and in remote areas using mobile lab platforms.

In addition to LABPLUS AFRICA, the CBRN CoE is providing 5 Million EUR to extend the geographic scope of existing bio programmes to better cover CBRN CoE partner countries worldwide..

3. EU CBRN network initiatives supporting the response to the COVID-19

a) Multiregional initiatives

Three interconnected projects **MedilabSECURE + MediPIET and STRONGLABS** take into account the effects of climate change on infectious diseases, the migration of potential vectors and the alert capacity of laboratories and institutions in charge of field epidemiology to prevent epidemics of new types. They strengthen the capacities of partner countries in terms of awareness, risk assessment, monitoring and control of these vector borne diseases. These three projects also prepare scientists (human and veterinary virologists, entomologists, medical staff, field epidemiologist, laboratory technicians) to analyze the major risks accordingly. By reinforcing an international network of laboratories (human virology, animal virology, entomology) and public health institutions, the three projects has clearly



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contributed to prepare the partner countries to face the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic, and accordingly has been easily and immediately reoriented towards a new concrete action plan. These projects are running in 5 CoE regions, with close to 30 partner countries: African Atlantic Façade, Middle East, North Africa and Sahel, South East and Eastern Europe, Central Asia.

MediPIET I, II, III has reinforced the regional network of field epidemiologists by providing systematic training sessions/courses and long-term fellowships. These epidemiologists, thanks to close links established by this project, are easily mobilised in case of cross-border outbreaks and other health threats. MediPIET has organised in February 2020 a specific COVID-19 module for senior epidemiologists with the participation of MediLabSecure. Stronger epidemiological capacities developed through the successive previous training phases are very useful to ensure preparedness for fighting the COVID-19 outbreak. The Train the Trainer modules co-organized with OMNE (National Observatory of New and Emerging Diseases) / MoH (Ministry of Health) Tunisia included:

- 1) Interactive lectures on all hazards IHR Core Capacities & Risk management cycle, indicator & event based surveillance, laboratory diagnostic of SARS-COV-2, rapid risk assessment, risk communication and community engagement;
- 2) Exercises with different COVID-19 scenarios and practical sessions;
- 3) Countries' presentations on readiness plans for COVID-19 and plenary discussions. Ten Mediterranean and Black Sea countries attended the ToT (17 participants).

Despite uncertainties due to COVID-19 epidemic international context, the Train the Trainer was successfully performed and provided an excellent opportunity for knowledge exchange and update among Public Health responsible seniors to respond to COVID-19 and to reinforce the network. **MediLabSecure** is implemented to the benefit of 22 EU neighbouring countries from the Mediterranean, Black Sea and Sahel Regions. The project has created 5 networks: Laboratory Human Virology network, Laboratory Animal Virology network, Laboratory Medical Entomology network, Public Health Institutes network, Veterinary Services Public Health network. These resources are at the service of the COVID-19 response. They are especially involved in developing and enhancing diagnostics capacities for the current COVID-



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19 crisis, sending the appropriate reagents if required, or covering costs for ordering diagnostic tools, ensuring training and ensuring a follow-up if needed.

Thanks to this support, the first confirmed cases of infection by the COVID-19 could be identified by several labs in the network of MediLabSecure, namely in Morocco, Algeria, Lebanon, North Macedonia and Serbia. On 23rd of April 2020, MediLabSecure informed, through an ad hoc communication, the national focal points in partner countries about the actions carried out at regional and national level in the fight against the epidemic.

During this global emergency situation, MediLabSecure could rely on the past work realised for preparedness to emerging viral diseases in the Mediterranean, Black Sea and Sahel Regions. The strength of the network established over the past few years allowed the human virology working group to contact, communicate, support and provide tools for facing the epidemic. These first collaborative successes illustrate perfectly the network ownership and the dynamic brought to ensure its sustainability.

STRONGLABS aimed at preventing biological risks increased by environmental and climate change by strengthening Public Health Laboratories, building institutional and individual capacities for detection. They are enhancing biosafety and biosecurity procedures in the labs and for samples transportation.

Stronglabs strengthened the capacities of Tajikistan's national public health laboratory, reference laboratory for COVID-19, in order to produce reliable test results.

In February 2020, Stronglabs supported an advanced training on laboratory quality management systems in Kyrgyzstan, with staff involved in COVID-19 testing.

Stronglabs is supporting the updating of the "WHO Guidelines for the collection of clinical specimens during field investigation of outbreaks". The document includes the acute respiratory syndromes with guidance for specimen collection, storage conditions and shipment, used in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

b) Regional initiatives



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Regional centers started as of February to set up regional on-line conferences to exchange on lessons learned and define priorities to launch new joint activities or reinforce existing networks and projects, as detailed below.

Central Asia:

- A 2 millions COVID19 EUR reinforcement of existing Project 53¹ has been signed mid May to cover Central Asia but also South East and Eastern Europe . It will allow both regions to benefit quickly from complimentary on-line trainings, provision of consumables and equipment. A lessons learned interregional conference will also be organised in late 2020 or early 2021.
- P53 implemented in the region and is positively impacting the capacities against COVID-19. In total, 88 master-trainers received specialised trainings on bio-safety and bio-security in six partner countries of Central Asia Regional Secretariat and in Kazakhstan (not a partner country of the CoE). Moreover, the national institutions such as the “M. Aikimbayev’s National Scientific Center For Especially Dangerous Infections” under the Ministry of Healthcare of the Republic of Kazakhstan received laboratory equipment, which is currently being used for the detection of coronavirus within the population. The Head of the National Reference Laboratory, National TB Center under the Ministry of Health of Kyrgyzstan has sent a letter of appreciation indicating that the training of P53 is being applied for training healthcare workers from hospitals that will be used as a COVID-19 treatment unit. The Republic of Uzbekistan expects the delivery of the two mobile laboratories within the Project 53, which will be used by the institutions at the frontline of the fight against COVID-19 crisis. In addition, to strengthen the capacities of the countries in tackling biohazards such as coronavirus, the work to extend the Project 53 by adding trainings and other capacity-building events, including those related to the lessons learnt and challenges posed by COVID-19, has started.

¹ Project 53 - Strengthening the National Legal Framework and Provision of Specialised Training on Biosafety and Biosecurity in Central Asian Countries; 2018-2021



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- The EU CBRN CoE Field Exercise Jeyran (attended by approx. 250 participants from 15 countries) held on 13-15 November 2019 in Uzbekistan increased capabilities in dealing with bio- and chemical attacks and helped enhance collaboration between law enforcement and other agencies on emergency preparedness and response. The Regional Secretariat reported that this event boosted confidence of professionals when tackling the COVID-19 crisis.
- Several National Focal Points in Central Asia are in the frontline in dealing with the current COVID-19 crisis. The Regional Secretariat has been a communication point for the latest recommendations from the WHO and other international guidance. Based on the needs in supplies and consumables expressed by the partner countries in Central Asia, the Regional Secretariat prepared a consolidated procurement proposal. The needs are to be satisfied in the framework of the EU CBRN CoE Initiative and will be integrated in the overall COVID-19 response efforts in the respective countries.
- A Cooperation Agreement between the CoE Regional Secretariat and the “M. Aikimbayev’s National Scientific Center For Especially Dangerous Infections” of Kazakhstan was concluded on 12 March 2020, which is being operationalized for the exchange of practices and information, including those related to coronavirus outbreak.

African Atlantic Façade

- P71 “Safer and more secure transportation of dangerous goods by road and rail in the AAF region” (SECTRANS AAF) granted free access to the CBRN CoE National Focal Points of the African continent to an e-learning course produce by the French Civil Protection for the fire brigades on the best practices to conduct a COVID-19 operations (protection and decontamination measures). The e-learning is open for distribution to all the civil protection/fire brigades’ teams of the CoE African network.
- Project 48 “Improved regional management of outbreaks in the CBRN Centres of Excellence Partner Countries of the African Atlantic Façade” was implemented in all ten partner countries of the region between 2016 and 2018, following the Ebola outbreak. Specific modules on epidemiology, health crisis management and



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communication were developed; trained experts are part of the national response teams and are supporting the management of the COVID-19 crisis. The trained experts are still using e-tools set up during the implementation phase of this project, of Project 69 (INSTASUR) and Project 71 (SECTRANS AAF) to communicate and exchange information on the crisis.

- Under CoE project 45, the EU deployed a Mobile Laboratory for in situ interventions on viral outbreak sites in combination with CBRN Capacity Building in Western Africa (EUWAM-Lab). This lab will be refurbished as soon as possible, used to gain BSL-3 diagnostic practice in early response and followed by a field exercise.
- Project 35 “Management of hazardous chemical and biological waste in the African Atlantic Façade region and Tunisia” trainings are proving to be very useful in the management of the crisis. The region is working on a follow-up of the project with a special focus on hospitals’ biological waste management.
- First responder’s equipment delivered within the framework of CoE project 33 “Strengthening the national CBRN legal framework and provision of specialized and technical training to enhance CBRN preparedness and response capabilities” was used to equip first line responders in Gabon.
- National Experts trained by the CoE project 3 “Knowledge development and transfer of best practice on bio-safety/bio-security/bio-risk management” are actively engaged in the Response to the COVID-19. The knowledge acquired through the CoE project 3 is proving very useful to advise the decision makers.
- In the beginning of April, the Regional Secretariat hosted a webinar dedicated to COVID-19, focusing on business continuity plans to be put in place during the crisis.

South East Asia

- The Regional Secretariat for South East Asia (SEA) and National Focal Points from across the region have been working to share experiences, good practices and lessons learned throughout the on-going COVID-19 crisis.
- On 24 April 2020, the Regional Secretariat hosted the first “South East Asia National Focal Points Informal Video Meeting on COVID-19” to share country updates, discuss



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business continuity plans for on-going CoE projects and identify specific topics for knowledge-exchange webinars between partner countries in the region. National Focal Points representing 8 out of 10 partner countries participated in this meeting, along with a select number of biological risk experts representing CBRN National Teams, EU representatives, and CoE project Team Leaders.

- On 26 May 2020, Thailand will deliver the first peer-to-peer regional webinar dedicated to COVID-19 knowledge exchange.
- The On-Site Technical Assistance expert has been regularly sharing the latest technical information and good practices on COVID-19 response with National Focal Points and the wider biological risk mitigation community in the region.
- Project 81 (BIOSEC)², which launched in January 2020, will raise awareness on biosecurity and biosecurity risk management, crosscutting biological risks (zoonoses/pests) and dual-use high-risk biological materials, improve information sharing and the coordination of response plans, and improve laboratory capacity for accurate identification of disease-causing agents, among other actions. In response to the on-going pandemic, the project will now also support the analysis of the COVID-19 crisis and will implement lessons learned in its activities.
- Project 62, providing On-site Technical Support, continues to support partner countries throughout the region, including through the long-term presence and expertise of a biological risk expert who is actively contributing to the sharing of COVID-19 technical information and best practices.
- Project 64 also continues to support the region during COVID-19 through the strengthening export control of dual-use items/strategic trade management.
- Out of the 23 CoE projects that have been completed to date in the SEA region, 17 have addressed biological risks exclusively or as part of cross-cutting CBRN risk mitigation work packages.

² Enhanced Biosecurity in South-East Asia



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- Previously, under Project 46³, the SEA Regional Secretariat successfully created a network of 16 biorisk management experts (Biorisk Expert Teams - BET) capable of training others in biosafety and biosecurity, while 115 National Laboratory Experts (NLEs) have been trained in biorisk management by local trainers (BET members). Furthermore, experts trained in the design, construction, operation and maintenance of basic and containment laboratories (Design Expert Teams) have been involved in the conception of appropriate triage spaces in hospitals.
- The Initiative has supported the drafting of six National CBRN Action Plans in the region – out of which three have already been officially adopted.

Middle East and Gulf Cooperation Council Countries

- In response to the requests for support from some Middle East countries to dedicate specific resources to tackle the COVID-19 crisis, DG DEVCO demanded to the implementers of the CoE Project 73 “CBRN Protection of critical infrastructure in Middle East CoE Region” to dedicate some of the financial resources to organize training and provide some equipment to Partner Countries. In view of this, specific training sessions for medical staff were organized and ongoing discussions are taking place to identify the appropriate measures to take in Iraq, Jordan and Lebanon.

The EU CBRN CoE Middle East Project 54 and the follow up GCC Project 82 have been building Capacities for Medical Preparedness and Response to CBRN Incidents:

- The CoE Project 54, which involved Jordan, Lebanon and Iraq and ran from 2016 to 2019, focused on strengthening capacities to manage medical responses to CBRN incidents in the Middle East. Thanks to this project, National Medical Training Centres have been identified and equipped in the three countries to respond to CBRN events. The Project

³ Project 46 “Enhancement of CBRN capacities of South East Asia in addressing CBRN risk mitigation concerning CBRN first response, biosafety and biosecurity, awareness raising and legal framework (2015-2018)”



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included train-the-trainers sessions for the three countries for paramedics and immediate response doctors (1st line), and emergency doctors and nurses (2nd line) on the management of casualties of CBRN accidents and other incidents. Medical equipment was also supplied to the countries by P54. The Centres are now being used as part of a sustainable training framework in Jordan, and the Middle East region is aiming to ensure a continuous national and regional capacity to train future generations of medical responders. In particular, trained trainers from Project 54, procedures learnt through the CBRN modules, and the equipment provided under its framework, are now being used to cope with the crisis.

- As mentioned above, EU CBRN CoE projects 36 and 74 (MediPIET) have included a training module on protection of critical command structure against COVID-19. This training already started in Lebanon.
- GCC CoE Project 82 is a replica of the MIE CoE Project 54. It was launched in 2019 and implemented using training materials (also in Arabic) developed for Project 54. One week training was organized in November 2019 in Kuwait for all the GCC Regional Secretariat partner countries, engaging both European and Middle East experts (from Project 54) and thus enhancing the regional and inter-regional cooperation.
- The On-site-assistance the CBRN CoE expert deployed in the GCC region has been providing support to GCC authorities and to EUDEL Abu Dhabi (following request) on COVID-19 information summaries, scenario development, PPE stocks and PPE decontamination guidance.
- In 2019, a Project Cooperation Agreement (PCA) between UNICRI and the Middle East Scientific Institute for Security (MESIS) was implemented under the CBRN CoE. Among other activities, the PCA covered training sessions for in the Bio-Safety and Bio-Security area in partnership with the Jordanian Princess Haya Biotechnology Centre. The topics covered were the following:
 - The proteomics and metabolomics testing including pathogen detection utilizing ALIZA station and toxin, pesticide and insecticide detection and identification
 - Molecular testing and diagnostics (Microarray technique, quantitative gene expression, metagenomics analysis and used bioinformatics tools).
 - Detection of genetically modified organisms using PCR techniques in addition to ALIZA test.
 - Biorisk management fundamentals



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- Biosecurity risk assessments
- Best Practices for Biosecurity laboratories

South East and Eastern Europe

- Project 44 Strengthening CBRN First Response Capabilities and Regional Cooperation was completed in this region in 2018 targeting 9 countries of the Western Balkan and Black Sea regions. It was focused on general components of CBRN emergency response including establishment of safety perimeters (in case of Bio emergency this is quarantine zones) and decontamination. Countries actively use General Operational Guidelines for first responders on CBRN events and SOPs in national languages elaborated within the framework of this project. As reported by Serbia, thanks to this project, first responders and other operational personnel in the country had the opportunity to learn how to use protective equipment during relevant incidents.
- Project 57, on “Strengthening crime scene forensics capabilities in investigating CBRN incidents in the South East and Eastern Europe (SEEE) Centres of Excellence Region” is also considered to have significantly benefited Serbia. According to the Serbian NFP, although he is not directly involved in the decision-making process, the equipment received in the framework of the project is now available to the country in the case of need. The State Border Guard Service (SBGS) of Ukraine also used experience obtained throughout this timeframe in doing their work during this period. SBGS received information about persons who arrived in Ukraine in advance, so they have been verified against all databases before arrival. Border control was carried out in a protective gear, in compliance with all health and epidemiological safety rules and regulations under the International Health Regulations of the World Health Organization in a segregated area of the aerodrome. Skills and experience were obtained after participation in training activities sponsored by the EU CBRN CoE, as well as the IAEA, the Norwegian Radiation and Nuclear Safety Agency, OSCE, the German Federal Office of Civil Protection and Disaster Assistance and other international organizations and partner countries.
- Ongoing Project 67 will strengthen CBRN waste management capabilities in South-East and Eastern European countries. Partner countries have indicated great interest in participating in all planned activities aimed to develop and enhance training



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capabilities and competencies, elaborate and transfer standard procedures and methodologies for specific aspects of CBRN waste management, transfer of best practices. All these efforts will eventually lead to establishing and enhancement of regional cooperation through strengthening of roles of existing local facilities to be used for training, education and expertise needs.

National CBRN Focal Points and designated experts from this region have finished the preparation phase aimed at launching a similar medical response project (Strengthening of CBRN Medical Preparedness and Response Capabilities in SEEE countries) during 2020. Draft Terms of Reference for this future project was submitted to the European Commission in February 2020. In accordance with the priorities expressed by SEEE partner countries, this project will primarily focus on chemical and biological medical response components.



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