

Pandemic Preparedness in the EAC Region

Supporting the East African Community in its advisory and coordinating role for the Partner States

The challenge

The Secretariat of the East African Community (EAC) is mandated to offer advisory and coordination support to the Partner States (Burundi, Kenya, Rwanda, South Sudan, Tanzania and Uganda) in combating infectious diseases. While East Africa was not affected by the Ebola epidemic in West Africa in 2014/2016, it too frequently experiences outbreaks of the disease with fatalities. The Rift Valley fever, Marburg fever, dengue fever and Crimean-Congo haemorrhagic fever viruses are endemic and can pose a threat to public health at any time. The spread of infectious pathogens is promoted by migration and cross-border trade, which is facilitated by the EAC's common market, and by the impact of climate change.

To prevent outbreaks of diseases that may affect public health, economic stability and the lives and livelihoods of the people in the EAC region, Partner States need to be prepared, including state of the art epidemiologic surveillance, detection and diagnosis capabilities. High levels of risk awareness among relevant stakeholders and continuous horizontal and vertical cooperation and information exchange are also important to meeting this objective.

The Ebola epidemic in West Africa revealed major shortcomings that accelerated the spread of the disease. These include the lack of rapid, clear and efficient communication tailored to the population and its specific cultural and social background and the absence of close cooperation between various disciplines. Interdisciplinary cooperation is especially important, as around two thirds of infectious diseases with the potential to take on epidemic proportions are zoonoses, infectious diseases that can be transmitted between animals and humans. Prevention requires regional strategies and skills that are lacking in the EAC.

Our approach

Against this backdrop, GIZ assists the EAC Secretariat and its Health Department to improve the regional crisis response capacity. It contributes to putting the East African Community Regional Contingency Plan into practice and developing and implementing a regional risk and crisis communication strategy.

Project Name	Support to Pandemic Preparedness in the EAC Region
Commissioned by	German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ)
Project region	East African Community (EAC)
Lead executing agency	EAC Secretariat
Overall term	01. 03. 2017 – 31. 08. 2019

The project advises the Secretariat on the sustainable integration of 'One Health'. This approach involves disciplines and sectors that play an important role in preventing and responding to outbreaks of infectious diseases in cross-sectoral, integrative epidemic management, with contributions from professionals including medical doctors and veterinarians, climate, environmental and agricultural experts, and representatives from trade and tourism, among others.

The project offers technical expertise and builds capacity with the overall aim of improving the EAC's support for Partner States in pandemic preparedness. It is practice-oriented and pursues a participative strategy that involves stakeholders from the EAC Partner States. The project contributes to a uniform, effective, responsible and balanced approach to pandemic preparedness at regional and national government level.



From left to right:

A scene from Sierra Leone during the Ebola epidemic in 2014/2016. (Photo: Loveness Isojick)

Health is a cross-cutting issue as reflected in the One Health disease management approach (Photo: GIZ)

*Also a healing effect: East African experts who fought the Ebola epidemic in West Africa share their experiences at a conference in Nairobi.
(Photos: GIZ/Lightincaptivity)*



Specifically, the project:

- supports the development of standard operating procedures (SOPs) and tests them under real-world conditions in simulation exercises;
- facilitates collaboration between sectors relevant to the prevention of and response to outbreaks of infectious diseases of public health concern in the spirit of 'One Health';
- assists in the development of a post-graduate One Health curriculum on pandemic preparedness and its inclusion in syllabi of universities in the EAC region;
- assesses regional and national response capacities and the implementation status of the WHO International Health Regulations (IHR);
- promotes cross-border response activities and harmonisation of national contingency plans and capacities with regional strategies;
- facilitates South-South exchange of experiences in pandemic prevention and control and the development of best practice and lessons learned;
- assists in establishing rapid response systems.

The project aims at improving protection for the populations in the EAC region from infectious diseases that threaten public health with the overall objective of improving the population's health-related and economic situation.

It contributes to the EAC-German programme 'Providing support for the integration process to improve the health of the popula-

tion in the East African Community (EAC)' and cooperates closely with related projects and programmes implemented by the German Development Bank (KfW).

The project collaborates with German Federal Institutes, GIZ's Rapidly Deployable Outbreak Investigation Team, and a number of international organisations, such as the World Health Organization and the World Organisation for Animal Health. It supports One Health activities under the 'Africa Regional - ESTHER Alliance: University and Hospital Partnerships in the Health Systems Strengthening Sector' project in the fight against antimicrobial resistance.

The benefits

When outbreaks of disease with epidemic potential are detected early on and measures are taken rapidly, everyone living in the EAC Partner States benefits. Poor rural populations are often hardest hit by the impacts of epidemics, since they lack the knowledge and financial means to recognise health risks and protect themselves effectively. They also often have only limited access to health services and effective treatments and thus benefit particularly from measures to support the EAC Secretariat, especially improved risk and crisis communication.

Success factors

The project aims to mainstream pandemic preparedness, implement the 'One Health' approach and risk and crisis communication through regional structures, and to develop capacities at regional level. It supports implementation of existing strategies and development of new ones, strengthens networks and complements them with flanking measures.



*Bringing your message across: Participants of a risk and crisis communication workshop in Nairobi train their roles in a mock press conference.
(Photo: GIZ)*

Capacity development measures at regional level and in selected institutions in the Partner States are designed to ensure that the skills acquired promote the countries' systems and cross-border cooperation in the long term. The regional approach aims to create structures and capacities relevant to all EAC Partner States.

Achievements at a glance

- East African experts who supported their West African colleagues in the fight against Ebola between 2014 and 2016 met at a supra-regional conference in Nairobi, organised by the project, to share their experiences for the first time. They formulated valuable lessons learned and recommendations that have since influenced political strategy papers and decision-making at national and regional level. The recommendations have been published and widely disseminated.
- The project reviewed the regional response to the bird flu outbreak in Uganda in 2018 and developed lessons learned to be better prepared for future outbreaks.
- The project integrated the 'One Health' approach and risk and crisis communication in the regional contingency plan for communicable and non-communicable diseases and its emergency structure.
- Standard operating procedures have been developed to put these approaches into practice. They will be tested in a cross-border table top exercise and in a subsequent field simulation exercise.
- The standing EAC Technical Working Group on communicable and non-communicable diseases has been expanded to include not only health professionals but also experts from animal health, the environment, agriculture, trade, tourism and risk and crisis communication with the aim of sustainably integrating the 'One Health' approach.
- Together with representatives from universities in all EAC Partner States, the project has started to develop a generic postgraduate 'One Health' curriculum on pandemic preparedness. It will be open to a broad variety of professional disciplines relevant to the prevention of and response to infectious disease outbreaks and to graduates from all EAC Partner States.

Two examples from the field:

Fighting Ebola

Dr Madina Hussein from Kenya was one of almost 500 East African health experts deployed to West Africa to help fight the Ebola epidemic between 2014 and 2016. Some stayed for two years or even longer.



Dr Hussein (right) worked on emergency medicine and infection prevention and control in Sierra Leone in 2015 and is still there today, working on health system restoration for WHO. She was one of almost 100 participants who shared their experiences at a conference organised and facilitated by the 'Support to Pandemic Preparedness in the EAC Region' project.

'Even the media reports and pictures could not prepare you for the human suffering', said Dr Hussein, 'Ebola is brutal, gory and a horrible way for people to die. When we got to Sierra Leone, we saw dead bodies on the streets, mothers crying after losing their only babies. That was very scary. I had only seen such things in horror movies, so it was shocking to see it in real life.'

Dr Hussein urged deploying institutions to make sure that people understand what they will be doing before they are deployed. They should, she argued, at least get some training and be mentally prepared through psychological counselling. 'Seeing so many people die in such a savagely violent manner changes you

Vaccination of dogs is the most effective and efficient means of protecting humans from Rabies infections
(Photo: GIZ/Philbert)



and how you think about pandemic responses', said Dr Hussein; 'I gained the experience that I craved and we did the best we could in an emergency situation - but 11,000 lives lost? I would like us to speak for these people by taking the lessons learned forward and coming up with a programme that prepares us to respond better next time, rather than just to react to circumstances'.

Fighting Rabies

Rabies is an infectious viral disease of global public health concern. It is the most fatal disease transmitted between animals and humans. Once an infected person shows symptoms, there is no cure. According to international scientific estimates, some 1,500 people are infected every year in Tanzania alone, most of

them children. Dog bites are the main source of infections. The World Health Organization regards the vaccination of dogs as the most effective intervention against rabies. 'This strategy impacts directly on public health by reducing the transmission of rabies to humans' said Fahari Marwa, Head of the Agriculture and Food Security Department of the EAC Secretariat during a GIZ supported awareness raising activity in Arusha.

Marwa raised his concern about the poor state of the data on rabies within EAC Partner States and called for closer cooperation between the human and veterinary medical professions in the EAC region in surveillance, diagnostics, prevention and treatment of infectious diseases to fully support the 'One Health' approach.

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