



MEETING REPORT

9th Annual EU–OCT Forum

Nouméa (New Caledonia), 1–4 March 2011

Background

The 9th Forum of the Overseas Countries and Territories (OCT) of the European Union (EU) was held in Nouméa, New Caledonia, from 1 to 4 March 2011. The objective of the meeting was to initiate discussions for the renewal of the framework agreement between OCTs and the EU, to take place in 2013.

On the basis of the work carried out by the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) with OCT, the European Commission's Directorate-General for Development and Cooperation (DG DEVCO) invited ECDC to chair a session on public health issues for OCT. The objective was to provide OCT with a background on public health issues affecting them, in the light of the review of the epidemiological profile of the OCT carried out through a tender in 2008 by ECDC*.

The session, planned to last two hours, was attended by most delegations and extended beyond the expected time. Three presentations were delivered by ECDC; first an institutional presentation, then three scenarios highlighting ECDC's role in emerging threats (Chikungunya fever in Italy, cholera epidemic in Haiti and the H1N1 pandemic).

The session triggered significant interest from the audience and many questions were asked by the delegations.

In summary, the discussion covered the following areas:

- Are OCT experts eligible for activities carried out by ECDC?
According to the working document, it was responded that OCT experts are eligible as European citizens, but appropriate funding should be identified for participation in activities that would require specific costs.
- OCT representatives expressed their concerns that no duplication of reporting should result from ECDC's activities, which was confirmed by ECDC. No reporting in any form is mentioned in the working document.
- Questions were asked about collaborations between ECDC and regional networks and the World Health Organization (WHO). Reassurance was provided by ECDC, in particular citing as examples ECDC's mission in Haiti, carried out in full collaboration with the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO), and the participation of the Pacific Public Health Surveillance Network, from the South Pacific community, in ECDC technical meetings on epidemic intelligence.

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The following were presented as potential activities:

- invite experts from OCT to technical meetings;
- involve OCT in European Commission's preparedness projects (e.g. Cruise ship sanitation project, virtual stockpile);
- support OCT preparedness plans for emerging threats;
- joint threat assessments;
- dispatch experts to support investigations;
- dispatch field teams;
- help to develop surge capacity.

Some OCT (French Polynesia, British Virgin Islands and Anguilla) underlined the fact that they were already involved in regional surveillance networks and sought information on the possible links between ECDC and these already existing schemes. Anguilla particularly drew attention to the possible increase of administrative burden if the OCT, having limited administrative capacities, had to deliver additional reports to ECDC. The ECDC representative explained that the Centre works closely with regional organisations and existing networks and insisted on the fact that the aim was not to create an additional structure, but to complement existing mechanisms.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the participation of ECDC in the EU–OCT Forum was well received and generated interest. The OCT were in favour of an increased collaboration with ECDC, provided that this would be done in perfect coherence with already existing mechanisms and that it would not increase their administrative burden. It is hoped that public health issues will be incorporated in the areas covered in the framework agreement, opening the way to OCT dedicated collaborative activities with the EU and potential funding.

Recommendation

To follow up with the Commission after the signing of the framework agreement.

* ECDC commissioned a needs assessment study in 2008, which was conducted by HPA in collaboration with INVS, RIVM, and the Greenland Medical Office of Health. This report fed the discussions at the OCT Forum. Copies can be obtained upon request to publications@ecdc.europa.eu.