



# Pandemic Prevention in the ECOWAS Region

## Strengthening ECOWAS, WAHO/RCSDC and National Coordinating Institutions for an improved prevention and control of disease outbreaks

### Challenges

Outbreaks of epidemic prone diseases in the West African region, especially the Ebola outbreak 2014-16, exposed weaknesses in the capacity of national and regional health systems to control epidemics. The region of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) is continuously faced with numerous outbreaks of epidemic prone infectious diseases, most of which are zoonoses, transmissible from animals to humans. Insufficient coordination of actors, ineffective communication of health risks, the lack of a qualified health workforce and limited reliable, real-time data from surveillance also contribute to the challenges faced in epidemic control. Significant shortcomings have emerged in applying the core competencies set out in the International Health Regulations (IHR 2005). Deficiencies and excessive demands in the control of disease outbreaks have been identified in regional and national organisations and processes. The support from the ECOWAS through the ECOWAS Commission and the West African Health Organisation (WAHO) is limited.

### Our Approach

The regional programme 'Support to Pandemic Prevention in the ECOWAS Region (RPPP)' including the Action of the European Union 'Support to the Regional Centre for Disease Surveillance and Control in the ECOWAS Zone' assists the ECOWAS Commission, WAHO and the Regional Centre for Surveillance and Disease Control (RCSDC) in supporting ECOWAS Member States to better implement the IHR. This includes the support to National Coordinating Institutions (NCIs) of the Member States connected to the RCSDC. Additionally, focus countries are Guinea, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Togo, Nigeria and Ghana. The programme works closely with other international stakeholders in the region and with



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bilateral health programmes of the German development cooperation in the focus countries to create synergies. All measures are tailored in line with the One Health approach which recognizes the interconnection of human, animal and environmental health. This way, WAHO is strengthened to fulfil its mandate to support Member States in epidemic control together with the RCSDC and NCIs.

Four approaches are being taken to achieve these objectives: Improving gender-sensitive health risks communication considering the One Health approach addresses the improvement of communication quality at regional and national levels. RPPP supported WAHO/ RCSDC in developing a regional risk communication strategy, which is being implemented. The strategy provides tailored guidance to Member



Left: RCSDC in Abuja, Nigeria © GIZ

Right: Assembly of Health Ministers Meeting 2017 in Abuja, Nigeria © GIZ

Implemented by





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Left: Medical volunteers at an Ebola treatment centre in Monrovia © WAHO

Right: SORMAS in use with a patient in Nigeria © GIZ/HZI

States on the communication of health risks to the population and the media. To improve communication and coordination between the ECOWAS Commission, WAHO, regional health agencies, NCI and partners, RPPP has supported WAHO/RCSDC in the development of a regional strategy for communication and coordination in epidemic control. Mechanisms of the strategy are being tested and revised through simulation exercises. To strengthen human resources for outbreak preparedness and control, the programme delivers tailored trainings together with GFA Consulting and the Regional Public Health Institute (*Institut Régional de Santé Publique*, IRSP) in Benin for regional and national health professionals. With the support of RPPP, National Rapid Response Teams in 4 focus countries and WAHO's Regional Rapid Response Team are being operationalised. To strengthen digitalized surveillance and outbreak management, the tool SORMAS (Surveillance, Outbreak Response, Management and Analysis System) is being expanded in Nigeria and introduced in Ghana in collaboration with the private sector via the German Helmholtz Centre for Infection Research (HZI).

All approaches contain information and communication technologies (ICT): software design competitions (Hackathons), an information sharing platform, (social) media monitoring, improved intranet/ extranet functions of ECOSuite, eLearning modules and SORMAS. Operational research will be applied for problem solving in surveillance and outbreak management. At national level, support to the NCIs includes the development/ revision of national risk communication plans, preparedness plans and standard operating procedures (SOPs); operational research on gender-sensitive risk communication, simulation exercises and trainings, support to regulatory aspects as well as to Emergency Operations Centres. A specific support to organizational development is provided to WAHO/RCSDC. Additionally, RPPP is supporting focus countries and the regional level in their preparedness and coordination during the Coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak.

## Impact in Numbers...

As part of a joint programme involving German development cooperation actors and the Kreditanstalt für Wiederaufbau (KfW), the programme supports efforts to protect the population of the ECOWAS Region, estimated at over 350 million in 15 Member States, more effectively against infectious disease outbreaks. Two regional strategies were developed and validated - corresponding Action Plans are being implemented. Two Member States revised their national plans according to the regional risk communication strategy. In the SOP development processes, countries orient their national SOPs along the regional ones. The deployment procedures of the Regional Rapid Response Team were validated by the 15 Member States and a team was deployed to Liberia. In Nigeria, SORMAS has been extended to 341 Local Government Areas in 18 states including the FCT with over 85 Mio. people. SORMAS has been expanded to cover 20 priority diseases including COVID-19 and is being used in its response in Nigeria.

## ...and in Stories

In collaboration with GFA Consulting, *blended-learning* courses have been developed for emergency risk communication, interinstitutional communication and coordination and simulation exercises which were conducted as trainings of trainer. The online and face-to-face trainings took place in June and September 2019 at IRSP with participants from WAHO/RCSDC, Regional Animal Health Centre (RAHC), ECOWAS Commission and the 15 Member States. The trainings were since cascaded down in Liberia and Sierra Leone in October 2019, in Togo and Guinea in November 2019, training almost 300 health professionals. Together with WAHO, IRSP is currently working on a business plan to permanently anchor the courses in the portfolio of the institute.

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