

INTERVIEW WITH THE HEADS OF THE SECRETARIATS OF THE EUROPEAN UNION CHEMICAL, BIOLOGICAL, RADIOLOGICAL AND NUCLEAR RISK MITIGATION INITIATIVE (EU CBRN COE)

This article presents the conclusions of the interviews conducted with the Heads of Secretariats of the EU CBRN CoE Initiative.

Which are the critical regional capacities needed for an effective risk crisis response to the COVID-19 pandemic?

The answers of the interviewed Heads of Secretariats focus on three core concepts known as the “3Cs”: Coordination, Collaboration and Communication. The 3Cs are considered a pre-condition for an effective response to any CBRN major incident. These three components can be applied for an efficient response to a pandemic such as COVID-19.

Coordination is envisaged at the technical level and focuses on the knowledge of response mechanisms, preparedness with Standard Operative Procedures (“SoPs”) and plans of action. These tools should be developed, tested and updated regularly.

Cooperation is intended as interagency cooperation, with the involvement of multiple actors. It must allow to share resources and expertise at national and regional levels. In some regions, the “work in silos” approach adopted by civil agencies has been identified as an obstacle to allow adequate coordination at the national and regional levels. Also, the division between the civil and the military has been pointed as an additional challenge.

Communication is intended as setting clear lines of early communication in order to effectively launch a coordinated response. Yet the COVID-19 pandemic has severely compromised the effective communication of public agencies with the population and challenged the trust in the governments.

Which capacities are to be considered as strong assets in the regions?

Good governance was indicated an important capacity present in the regions. This includes, but is not limited to: a clear political engagement to tackle the CBRN risks; the coordination under one authority; a smooth cooperation between the scientific community and the decision makers and a transparent communication with the public - in particular with young people - based on the good practices observed in neighboring states.

More technical capacities that are present many regions are also considered a great asset, namely: a strong medical infrastructure, well-trained experts in fields linked to CBRN, SoPs already set up to tackle a sanitary crisis (such as Ebola), an adaptable industry in crisis allowing an early production of Personal Protective Equipment (“PPE”) and a robust medical surveillance system using artificial intelligence.

In which way has the EU CBRN CoE Initiative supported the region to enhance capacities?

The priorities linked to the COVID-19 crisis response mirror the good practices observed in the different CoE regions: effective communication channels at the regional level; a flexible regional preparedness plan; and the establishment of strong partnerships with the regional industries, policy makers and the scientific community. Raising public awareness on COVID-19 risks and mitigation measures, as well as dispelling

misinformation about COVID-19 pandemic and vaccines are also considered priorities.

A wise person once said: "During a crisis, it is too late to exchange business cards." The CoE Initiative has indeed built the infrastructure of interregional communication and cooperation before the onset of the pandemic. In most CoE regions, this allowed for a constant communication amongst National Focal Points throughout 2020 and 2021.

The CBRN CoE also helped build a network of experts from different countries, including the On-Site Assistance experts, who have interacted and exchanged experiences and knowledge based on their respective situations. This resource is considered of tremendous importance.

The Heads of Secretariats indicated several CBRN CoE Projects financed by the European Commission that were particularly helpful in building capacities to deal with the COVID-19 crisis, namely:

- Project 53 "Strengthening the national legal framework and provision of specialised training on biosafety and biosecurity" (Central Asia Region).
- Project 48 "Improved regional management of outbreaks in the CBRN Centres of Excellence Partner Countries" (African Atlantic Façade Region).
- Project 46 "Enhancement of CBRN capacities in addressing CBRN risk mitigation concerning CBRN first response, biosafety and biosecurity, awareness raising and legal framework" (South East Asia region).
- Project 88 "Strengthening of CBRN medical preparedness and response capabilities" (South East and Eastern Europe Region).
- Project 34 "Strengthening capacities in CBRN event response and in chemical and medical emergency" (Middle East Region).
- Project 33 "Strengthening the national CBRN legal framework and provision of specialized and technical training to enhance CBRN preparedness and response capabilities" (Eastern and Central Africa).
- Furthermore, successful projects were implemented in the biorisk area addressing inter-regional needs, namely:
- MediPIET "Establishment of a Mediterranean programme for intervention Epidemiology Training" (Project 32).
- Stronglabs "Preventing biological risks increased by environmental and climate change by strengthening public health laboratories" (Project 76).
- Medilabsecure "Preventing biological risks increased by environmental and climate change in the Mediterranean, Black Sea and Sahel regions by strengthening institutional capacities in the context of One Health" (Project 75).
- Labplus Africa "Strengthening laboratory capacities in Africa against COVID-19 and other epidemics: from set up in Senegal to scale up in Africa" (Project 85).

Which are the future priorities that could be addressed within the framework of the EU CoE CBRN Initiative?

In the coming years the focus should be on the "lessons learned from COVID-19" in the regions, coupled with an international exercise focusing on a handling the pandemic through cross-border cooperation.

Such exercise would be in line with the past field exercises organized within the framework of the EU CBRN Centres of excellence, in particular the "Jeyran" exercise held in Uzbekistan in November 2019 and the " ARZ exercise" held recently in Lebanon in December 2021.

More generally, biosecurity through a multi-sectoral involvement is of interest in all regions. Capacity building in this area should focus on improving biosecurity management with effective tools to enhance capabilities for highly communicable diseases and global catastrophic biological events, such as pandemics.

Raising awareness of the public as well as improving information sharing and coordination of response plans would be also crucial elements to test.

