

Tackling epidemics

The Epidemic Preparedness Team supports partner countries of German development cooperation in bringing outbreaks of diseases under control.

The challenge

Almost every day outbreaks of serious infectious diseases occur somewhere in the world. If they are discovered too late, not identified or misdiagnosed, they can cost many lives and wipe out development achievements. Viruses need no visa – in a world that is becoming increasingly linked through international trade and tourism, pathogens can spread at extreme speed.

In many partner countries of development cooperation, health systems are not adequately equipped to identify infectious diseases quickly and take effective action to contain them. Many factors determine whether or not an outbreak will spread: the condition and equipment of health facilities and laboratories, the skill level of staff, but also political structures, prevailing cultural norms and communication have significant influence. Time too is an important factor – the faster action is taken, the more likely it is that an outbreak can be contained before it escalates into an epidemic or even a transnational pandemic. If the affected countries have no trust in international structures, however, or if they have serious concerns about economic restrictions that might be imposed, outbreaks might only be reported once they reach crisis level.

Our approach

One strength of German development cooperation is the trust that has been built up over a period of many decades in partner countries. Trust can open doors in difficult situations like these. We are also familiar with conditions on the ground which helps us work with our partners to identify potential weaknesses quickly.

The Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) has now launched the Epidemic

Preparedness Team, which offers particularly flexible support. If a partner country or partner organisation requests assistance to address an outbreak, a team can be deployed to strengthen the health system's "defence capacity".

Project name	German Epidemic Preparedness Team (SEEG)
Commissioned by	Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ)
Implementing organisation	Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH
Project region	Worldwide
In cooperation with	Bernhard Nocht Institute for Tropical Medicine (BNITM) and Robert Koch Institute (RKI)
Duration	October 2015 to September 2017
Financial volume	EUR 3 million

A number of organisations already specialise in emergency aid and crisis intervention. To ensure that we do not duplicate services that already exist, but rather close an important gap, the Epidemic Preparedness Team focuses on intervention at a very early stage – to prevent crises emerging in the first place.

Since every outbreak is different, interdisciplinary teams are put together according to the needs of each mission. For this purpose, a pool of experts offering a wide spectrum of expertise and experience was established. Not only health system and laboratory experts are members of the pool, but also specialists in water supply, sanitation, hygiene and logistics, as well as e.g. anthropologists. This extensive reservoir of knowledge and the variety of different viewpoints included ensure that we can take into account as many of the factors as possible that play a part in the spread of a disease.



L. to r.: Partner country experts work with the team to identify solutions. This laboratory in Togo can now test for Lassa fever too

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To synergise and to make the best possible use of the expertise available, renowned specialist institutions like the Robert Koch Institute (RKI), the Bernhard Nocht Institute for Tropical Medicine (BNITM) and the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) cooperate for this project. These organisations also provide experts for missions.

Good health is goal, prerequisite and result of sustainable development. This makes it central to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which was adopted by the global community in September 2015. Good health is a human right, and promoting it is part of good governance. The Epidemic Preparedness Team is one component of Germany's commitment to improving international response capacities in global health emergencies, and also contributes to the six-point-plan of the German Government. This plan draws lessons from the Ebola epidemic, which cost more than 11,000 lives in West Africa in 2014/15.

Close consultation with bodies such as the World Health Organization (WHO) and intensive dialogue with non-governmental organisations brings together and harnesses their valuable experience – and an epidemic preparedness network is born.

An example from the field: Togo vs. Lassa fever

Adodo Sadju heads Togo's National Institute of Hygiene. He sounded the alarm immediately when laboratories in the USA and Germany confirmed the first two cases of Lassa fever in Togo. This pernicious disease is similar in many ways to Ebola, but different procedures are needed to diagnose it. Sadju contacted the Bernhard Nocht Institute, with which he had already worked. What followed was the first deployment of the Epidemic Preparedness Team. In May and July 2016 experts seconded by BNITM, RKI and GIZ put in place a system for diagnosing Lassa fever in Togo, and trained laboratory staff. Now the tests can be conducted in Togo, without recourse to laboratories abroad – and that saves valuable time.

"We now feel we are well prepared and are confident that swift diagnosis makes that crucial difference: the earlier we correctly identify suspected cases, the faster we can take steps to prevent any further spread of the disease," says Sadju.



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