Building ICT capacities for Public Health Surveillance

The improvement of information, communication and technology (ICT) capacities in the Pacific Island countries and territories' health sector is obviously a key component for the smooth running and sustainable development of PPHSN network, the latter being largely based on ICT applications for communication and other purposes.

SPC and WHO continuous support

In respond to these needs, SPC and WHO carried out a number of projects and training activities meant to improve ICT skills and access in the PICTs since the creation of the PPHSN. For example, between 1998 and 2001, SPC trained about 100 health professionals around the region on the basics of public health surveillance and the use of the EpiInfo 6 software (for public health surveillance). In addition to EpiInfo, these courses included sessions on the use of email (in relation to PacNet), internet, etc. In 2001, WHO developed a regional strategy and project for the PICTs on open learning. This initiative took shape in 2003 with the Pacific Open Learning Health Net (POLHN), which was very well received by the Pacific Island health workers. It has the double advantage of training health professionals at their workplace and providing them with very good ICT tools.

New project launched in 2004

In 2002, during meetings about the regional components of US-affiliated jurisdictions' proposal to be funded by the United States of America (CDC) through bioterrorism (BT) funds, the improvement of ICT capacities with regards to surveillance and data/information security and communication was duly highlighted. Therefore, it became part of the regional proposal financed by CDC/BT funds through the US-affiliated PICTs and PIHOA. Later on, the project was named **"Building ICT capacities for Public Health Surveillance".**

As well, SPC has been collecting routine data on communicable diseases (CDs) from 1974 (SPEHIS, stopped in 2003). Overall data and information collection, availability and exchange needed to be improved. A regional PI-based CD database was discussed these last years (in the PPHSN Coordinating Body, between WHO and SPC, and at the first regional EpiNet workshop in September 2003). WHO agreed that SPC should be the depository of Pacific Island data on CDs. The development of this database should be also the opportunity to develop national/territorial capacities, i.e. CD databases and more comprehensive surveillance. This could take advantage of the current project, especially the database and data and information exchange aspects.

Objective

Within the framework of the PPHSN, in the area of outbreak-prone (including BT-related) communicable diseases, to ensure the security of local networks and data storage and transmission systems in the health department, and help implement secure regional data collection/information exchange with a country-specific interface.

This objective is related to the following needs:

PCs and networks are used nearly everywhere in the departments of health, to keep data and communicate information. Support services are often not sufficient. Improvements to data security and antivirus protection management must be organised locally in the jurisdictions. Alternative ways to connect to the email and Internet and the possibility of an "Emergency Line" have to be explored together with the local ISP. The best ways to exchange organised information using ICT have to be identified.

Progress

The project started in April 2004. After an initial phase of planning, a questionnaire related to the areas to be addressed by the project was sent to all the US-affiliated PICTs and the responses were analysed. A discussion list, called "ICT4PHS", was created, aiming at facilitating the discussions about the project, and a workshop was held in August 2004. It was then followed by in-country visits by members of the SPC project team (including the consultants). Below is an overview of the workshop. A summary report of this project will be published in one of the next issues of Inform'ACTION.

Intersectoral cooperation at SPC
This project is coordinated by Public Health Specialists and ICT experts from SPC.

SPC's ICT Section
SPC increased its direct involvement in national ICT projects in 2004.
Some of the island countries that have received some form of support from SPC's ICT section in 2004 include: (a) American Samoa, CNMI, FSM, Guam, Marshall Islands and Palau through the *Building ICT capacities for Public Health Surveillance* project; (b) 50 hours ICT training to community education training students from April-June every year; (c) in-country technical assistance to Ministry of Agriculture in Solomon Islands (10 days), at the Maritime College in Santo, Vanuatu (six days), at the Micronesian Maritime Authority (MMA) and the Statistics Department, Pohnpei, FSM and (d) Vanuatu, home for both the current and most recent incumbents for the Pacific Islands Network Associate (PINA).

This year, the section prioritised two objectives:
- Sustained, high-quality ICT services in support of SPC programmes; and
- Enhanced information and communication services in Pacific Island countries and territories (PICTs).

Growing needs and importance
In 2003, SPC participated actively in support of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) agenda, both at the national and regional level. In August 2003, SPC and the Pacific Islands Telecommunication Association (PITA) signed a MOU also.
These new development partnerships reflect the growing importance of ICT in the medium to long-term development of public services, social and natural resources in the Pacific Islands.

ICT4PHS Workshop

The workshop was held 2–6 August 2004 at the College of Micronesia–FSM in Pohnpei. It was organised by SPC with financial support from USA (CDC) through bioterrorism funds and SPC through PREPARE project (funded by France and NZAID).

Its objectives were, with the participation of US-affiliated PICT Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and Public Health Surveillance specialists, to:
- review the assessment of the current ICT capacities in the jurisdictions;
- deliver tailored training based on the assessment results;
- train in database development and management, including interfaces for data exchange; and
- run a planning session for in-country activities to be carried out by the consultant and local ICT specialist.

Participants included 25 public health specialists, ICT technicians and health statisticians from American Samoa, Federated States of Micronesia (from Chuuk, Kosrae and Pohnpei States), Guam, Marshall Islands, Northern Mariana Islands and Palau.