LABORATORY TWINNING INITIATIVE

CALL FOR EXPRESSIONS OF INTEREST

Instructions for applicants

The outline proposal or questionnaire is to be sent in electronic format:
Dr C. Mathiot or Dr S. Cognat at mathiotc@lyon.who.int or cognats@lyon.who.int
or by fax (+33 4 72 71 64 71) or by mail to WHO Lyon Office,
58, avenue Debourg, 69007 Lyon, France

The deadline for the present call is: 20 April 2006

1. OBJECTIVES OF THE LABORATORY TWINNING INITIATIVE*

Within the International Health Regulations (IHR 2005), the objective of the laboratory twinning initiative is to contribute to the sustainable improvement of public health laboratory services in developing countries through establishing partnerships between these laboratories and institutions (reputable public health or appropriate academic or research organizations) and linking these individual partnerships in a network.

The twinning projects are expected to address the competencies needed to achieve this objective, based on an assessment of needs and mutually agreed priorities.

Led by LYO and following recommendations from an independent steering committee, the initiative will complement the LYO capacity development programme for laboratory specialists started in 2001.

* The initiative is detailed in the WHO brochure “Developing laboratory partnerships to detect infections and prevent epidemics” WHO/CDS/CSR/LYO/2005.19,
(English and French versions available)
2. GROUND RULES

A twinning project is conceived as a joint commitment between two laboratories working together in a voluntary peer-to-peer partnership on issues of common interest. Each partner must contribute human and/or in-kind resources to the project. Twinning should be more than collaboration on focused issues; it is expected to lead to a measurable strengthening of the resource-limited laboratory. The duration of a twinning project should not be less than three years.

In addition:

- The agreement of the national government is a prerequisite for a twinning project. These partnerships need to fit in with government priorities and national plans for building a functional public health laboratory system.
- The resource-limited laboratory must be acknowledged by the government as its national public health laboratory or a component of its public health laboratory structure.
- The work of the laboratories participating in twinning projects must be relevant to national and regional plans for the organization of an epidemic alert and response network.
- The objectives and expected outcomes, evaluation process, conditions of collaboration, and roles and responsibilities of each partner must be clearly defined.
- Where possible and appropriate, the development of commonly defined research projects is encouraged as these often provide good opportunities to strengthen capabilities and attract donors’ support.

A twinning project is expected to address the competencies needed to allow the resource-limited laboratories to fulfill essential functions and participate more efficiently in the detection of epidemic-prone diseases. Based on an assessment of needs and mutually agreed priorities the contents of the proposal may include projects such as:

- laboratory-based surveillance of communicable diseases;
- diagnostic methods and reagents, e.g. introduction of new diagnostic methods in bacteriology, virology, parasitology; use of molecular tools; development of rapid diagnostic tests, etc.;
- training on, and support in, the development of standard operating procedures;
- assistance in establishing and managing quality assurance and biosafety programmes;
- development of laboratory management skills;
- joint research programmes enabling capacity strengthening;
- development of in-country laboratory networks.

3. STEERING COMMITTEE

An independent steering committee has been established to provide advice and recommendations to the initiative secretariat.

The role of the steering committee is to assist the secretariat by:

- providing advice on priorities;
• making recommendations on standards for proposals, the review process, standards for laboratory evaluation, performance indicators, etc.;
• providing advice on the content and expected outcomes of project proposals;
• ensuring the relevance of individual twinning projects to the overall objective of the initiative;
• providing advice on twinning projects which merit seeking financial support;
• assessing the outcomes of the twinning projects;
• monitoring the impact of the twinning initiative.

4. DETAILED PROCESS

Step 1 - Call for expressions of interest
The call is issued on the WHO/EPR web site and through all WHO regional and national offices. It includes a proposal outline form designed for the resource-limited laboratories and a questionnaire to be completed by the specialized institutions.

The deadline for reception of expressions of interest (outline proposals and questionnaires) is 20 April 2006. Prior to this date the secretariat is available to discuss any issues at the request of laboratories and institutions that need further explanation or advice.

Step 2 – Selection of expressions of interest
The secretariat will carry out an initial screening of expressions of interest to exclude those that do not meet the basic requirements (inadequate objectives, lack of relevant information, etc.). Expressions of interest that pass the first screening stage will be examined and carefully checked against the selection criteria listed below. This selection phase will be followed by a visit to the resource-limited laboratory. To facilitate the task, the secretariat will ensure thorough consultations with different stakeholders and the steering committee.

1. Selection criteria for the resource-limited laboratories:
   • political commitment at national level (Ministry of Health);
   • assessment of commitment to participate, evidence of clear needs and wishes;
   • good organization at country level to avoid risks of undermining activities of the national laboratory system;
   • evidence that the laboratory is responsible for supporting the improvement of the national public health laboratory system;
   • relevance regarding the implementation of regional plans for public health programmes related to epidemic-prone diseases; and
   • relevance to the implementation of the IHR 2005 at national level.

It is planned to select 12 expressions of interest during the first round. Prior to engaging in a twinning project, laboratory capacity will be assessed, using a standardized tool, which will constitute the baseline to measure progress.

2. Selection criteria for specialized institutions:
   • international recognition, based on criteria such as scientific merit, designation as WHO Collaborating Centre, organization of international training courses, etc.;
   • relevant and sustainable scientific and technical expertise;
ability to contribute to strengthening national and regional public health laboratory capacity; 
proven public health awareness; and 
experiences of successful collaborations with resource-limited laboratories.

Feedback and justification will be provided to selected and non-selected applicants according to the above-mentioned criteria.

3. Matching the partners:
The secretariat will consult with the steering committee to match the partners. The process will be interactive, taking into account the areas of specialization and special interests of the partners, the feasibility of the proposed activities, and the chances of success. Various factors will be taken into consideration and external advice will be sought when needed.

Among the factors to be considered are:
- shared vision and goals; both partners must have a mutual understanding of the purpose and expected outcomes of the project;
- concordance of needs and skills;
- geography: laboratories and institutions located in the same geographic region will be encouraged for reasons of logistics and cost, and because they are likely to share priorities and problems in terms of common pathogens; and
- need to communicate in a common language.

It is important for the partners to have a good understanding of each other and the national context within which they operate, and to implement the project with flexibility and pragmatism. Mutual understanding and a commitment at a personal level, and shared objectives, will be critical for the success of the projects, especially at the start.

Step 3 – Assessment visit to the selected resource-limited laboratories in developing countries
The objectives of the assessment visit are:
- to secure a strong commitment from the health authorities and other partners in the country;
- to ensure a good understanding between the partners;
- to outline the contents of the collaboration, including duration, proposed activities, and indicators to facilitate the progress review; and
- to meet with potential bilateral donors (see section on Funding).

If not already performed the visit will be an opportunity to carry out a baseline evaluation of the laboratory using the standardized Laboratory Assessment Tool developed by LYO.

The assessment visit (1 week) will be coordinated by the WHO Country Representative. Participants will include WHO staff and a representative of the specialized institution (the person who will be in charge of developing the twinning collaboration). External consultants may also be invited to participate.
Step 4 – Detailed applications
At the end of the assessment visit, the partners will be invited to provide the secretariat with a detailed joint application, including the goal of the project, the activities to be undertaken, the schedule, the role and responsibilities of each partner, progress indicators that allow adequate monitoring of the outcomes of the project, and the proposed funding scheme. A form will be provided for the detailed application.

The application should be jointly written by the partners, based on the outline proposal submitted by the public health laboratory, the questionnaire completed by the institution and the discussions that took place during the phase of partnership-building and the visit to the resource-limited laboratory.

The application should be signed by the partners at management level and include a letter of support from the health authorities supervising the resource-limited laboratory.

Step 5 - Review of detailed applications, decision for WHO support
Detailed applications will be reviewed by the steering committee to allow the secretariat to make the final selection of projects to be implemented, based on the criteria mentioned above (step 2).

The partners of the selected twinning projects will be invited to sign a Memorandum of Understanding stating their commitments.

Step 6 - Implementation of the twinning projects
The projects should start as soon as resources are made available, from the partners themselves or their parent institutions, or from external sources (WHO, health authorities, donors, etc.) according to the agreed scheme.

Step 7 - Review of progress and assessment of outcomes of the twinning projects
Regular communication (e-mails, internet portal, visits when possible) between the twinned partners and the secretariat will enable continuous follow-up of activities to be carried out.

An annual technical report will be prepared and submitted for review by the steering committee and the secretariat according to an agreed format using the indicators proposed by the partners themselves and the global objectives of the project. Indicators should be quantitative wherever possible. A selection of the WHO laboratory assessment indicators may be used. This will allow a more objective assessment of capacity improvement of the resource-limited laboratory.

Depending on the funding sources, technical and/or financial reports should be submitted to the donors on request. The review of the outcomes of the twinning projects by the secretariat, in consultation with the steering committee, will constitute the condition enabling the donor(s) to consider continuing funding of a given project.
5. FUNDING

The funding of the twinning projects may come from different sources such as the partners themselves, the national health authorities, WHO at country or regional level, bilateral and global donors, etc.

The secretariat and the steering committee functions will be funded by WHO. WHO will also fund the preliminary visits to the pre-selected countries and contribute to the setting-up and monitoring of the selected twinning projects.

The main characteristics of the initiative are the following:

i) set up under the auspices of WHO;
ii) support from the national health authorities;
iii) long-term collaboration with renowned institutions;
iv) monitoring and assessment benefits from an external Steering Committee; and
v) leading role in the implementation of the IHR 2005.

It is anticipated that these characteristics will attract interest and financial support from global or bilateral donors.

6. TIMELINE FOR THE PRESENT CALL:

- **Deadline for receipt of expressions of interest:** 20 April 2006 at the latest
- **Response and feedback to applicants, selection of proposals and matching of partners:** 31 May at the latest
- **Organization of preliminary visits:** as soon as possible from the proposal’s selection
- **Receipt of detailed applications:** maximum one month following the visit
- **Final decision on selection and feedback to applicants:** maximum one month after receipt of the detailed applications

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