

Interreg supports healthcare

How Interreg projects and partners helped during the early stages of COVID-19

Short examples of how cooperation actors joined the response to COVID-19, and supported frontline medical services.



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Foreword

The novel coronavirus known as COVID-19 fundamentally changed the world in a matter of months. The virus has tragically claimed over a million lives and it has affected almost every one, every where.

Interreg programmes exist to create new partnerships across International borders. For many Interreg programmes, the border regions they work in have had intangible borders for nearly 20 years.

In March 2020, many of those borders once again existed in a very real way.

In the specific cases of cross border health projects, partners were on the front line in responding to the crisis. In several cases, projects with no direct relationship to healthcare, found a way to adapt their activities to support the response to this crisis.

In addition to current partners, projects from the previous cooperation period (2007 - 2013) also had an impact on the crisis. The partnerships created in the previous period have matured, and new benefits can be seen from the experiences of cooperating.

Interact presents the following examples as illustrations of how Interreg continued to work, and how it adapted in response to the global health crisis.

These are just some of the examples of where EU funding, and Interreg funding in particular, supported the response to COVID-19 and helped to reduce the risk to medical staff as well as helped to put the right equipment where it was needed.



Ambulances with respirators

#MadeWithInterreg

The RESCUE project purchased ambulances with respirators to meet existing needs. They also helped the Poland-Belarus-Ukraine border area to face COVID-19.

Even before COVID-19, health concerns related to cardiovascular and respiratory illness were recognised as a shared concern in the Poland-Belarus-Ukraine border area.

The RESCUE project had already purchased specialist equipment, including ambulances, resuscitation devices, as well as respirators for use in ambulances and hospitals to improve the local health infrastructure.

This was a key part of the projects goal to improve the health of people living in this cross border area, in meeting some specific identified health needs on a cross border basis.

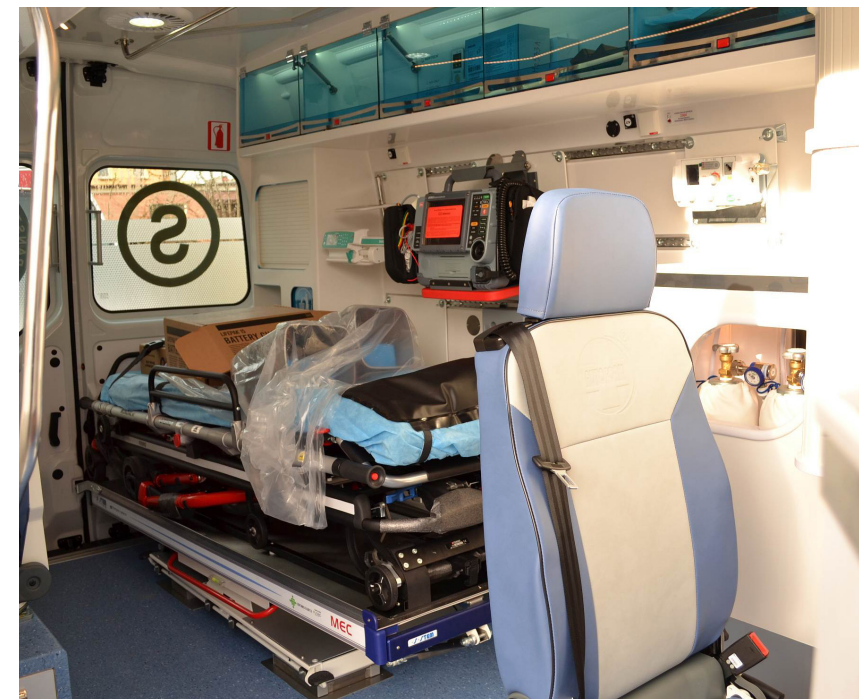
With the onslaught of COVID-19, this equipment was ready and available for use at Tomaszów Lubelski County Hospital.

The project also provided, pre-COVID-19, training for over 250 medical staff on a *train the trainer* approach to share knowledge and established common practices in the regions.

Beyond COVID-19, this project is designing and establishing joint principles and mechanisms for future cooperation.

These mechanisms will further support these three cross-border communities to work together, with support from their neighbours.

This project is financed by ENI Poland-Belarus-Ukraine 2014-2020



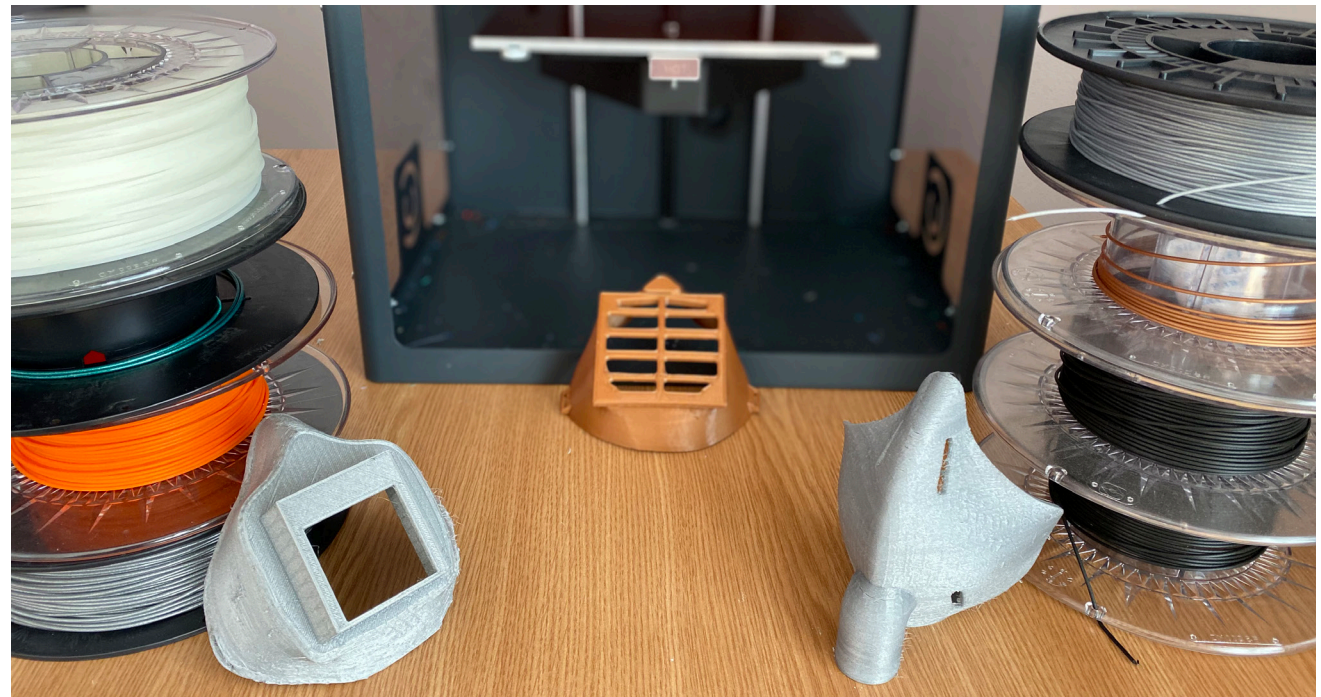
Scarce medical equipment provided by Interreg

Masks, visors and key parts of ventilators were among the many items produced by the FILA project's 3D printer, which is housed at the Inovaciono Preduzetnički Centar Tehnopolis, Montenegro.

The acute shortage of key equipment was an urgent challenge for health care providers in spring 2020. Global demand for equipment far outstripped production, which also faced new challenges as lockdowns and travel bans disrupted the foundations of global logistics.

During the emergency, the FILA project's 3D-printer, used by the project to explore innovation in agriculture, was repurposed to provide medical equipment. This included protective visors, which were donated to the Institute of Public Health, Montenegro.

The application of 3D-print technology to provide urgent medical equipment is being further explored. In the future, approved templates could enable anyone with a 3D-printer to provide medical equipment.



Modernisation and life-saving equipment

The “Your health matters!” project supported the modernisation of equipment in two hospitals that were key life-saving equipment in treating COVID-19.

When the Caritas Rosiorii de Vede Municipal Hospital in Romania was designated as a support hospital for the treatment of patients infected with coronavirus, it faced the same challenges as other hospitals in ensuring sufficient equipment to meet increasing levels of demand.

To ensure it could meet any such increase in critically ill patients, Zimnicea City Hospital lent 2 injectomates, 3 vital functions monitors and 1 general anaesthesia device. All this equipment was purchased through the Your Health Matters project, and is on loan for the duration of the emergency.

This project is financed by Interreg V-A Romania-Bulgaria



Similar experience; different countries. COVID-19's urban versus rural divide

Doctors in rural areas quickly realised their challenges were more similar across international borders than with urban doctors in their own countries.

One of the realities of COVID-19 is how similar the experiences can be of places located very far away from each other. While international cities were often the hot spots for COVID-19, the most vulnerable were often living in rural communities.

Whereas video call appointments were a trend in some cities even before COVID-19, rural communities are typically less digitally connected. The challenges of rural practitioners, in training themselves and their patients to digitally engage, is one example of how shared knowledge enabled medical care to continue in these challenging times.

The Northern Periphery and Artic Programme enabled the creation of a COVID-19 response group, an informal group that already knew

each other through cooperation in the area.

The group shared knowledge, solutions and best practice in responding to COVID-19 in the early stages of the virus.

The group continues to meet to discuss clinical challenges, health and well-being, technological solutions, citizen and community engagement as well as the economic impact of COVID-19.

In each of these five areas, the rural setting provides a very different outlook when compared to more urban environments.

You can read more about this work and the benefits of a more regional approach at: <https://interreg.eu/interreg-highlights>



Matching needs for specialist textiles with local producers

A cross-border exercise to map and explore new opportunities for the textile sector was able to quickly respond to the urgent need for specific textiles.

TEXMED conducted an emergency online survey, to map the supply chain of coveted textile sanitary materials – from self-filtering masks to protected gloves.

In Spain in just two weeks, ninety orders were filed through the alliance.

*TEXMED is funded by the ENI CBC MED programme
Photo © UN Women by Joe Saade (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)*



Patients in need, accessing medical services across international borders

The SHG-Kliniken Voelklingen hospital in Germany, on the border of France and Luxembourg, helped to save lives by taking COVID-19 positive patients.

The SHG-Kliniken Voelklingen hospital is a key part of the cross border cooperation in the Grand Region. It has received funding from two Interreg projects, including one that aims to better enable cross border healthcare access for residents.

Located just a few kilometres from Germany's border with France, the hospital saw the pressure neighbouring medical centres were under, from the rapid spread of COVID-19, and was able to support them.

The hospital directly received COVID-19 positive patients from across the border in France. These patient transfers helped clinics ensure they were not overwhelmed. The SHG-Kliniken also made equipment available to help meet the acute need.

Whilst still serving its local community, ventilators and other life-saving equipment that was in critical shortage were made available for other hospitals in the area.

The commitment of the project partners to ensuring cooperation continues, even in the most challenging times, ensured that life saving equipment was available when and where it was needed.

The SKG-Kliniken hospital receives Interreg EU funding as a partner in the SANTRANSFOR and COSAN projects.

SANTRANSFOR, in particular, focuses on enabling cross border access to medical services.



Can single-use medical equipment ever be environmentally friendly?

Cornstarch, sugar cane, tapioca roots and potato starch are a few of the ingredients that create Polylactic Acid, a biodegradable thermoplastic, which can be used in 3D printing.

The personal protective equipment needs of healthcare workers to treat infected patients as safely as possible is both necessary and extensive. Without healthy medical staff, hospitals are unable to treat patients.

However, as the safest equipment is single-use, the disposable nature of this equipment leads to tonnes of additional equipment and refuse. This means the essential safety of medical staff is creating an environmental challenge we must meet.

One initiative that could produce a greener solution to some of the challenges is exploring the use of Polylactic Acid. This biodegradable thermoplastic is used in 3D printing, and can produce visor holders and face masks.

Another potential solution also explored by the Centre for Knowledge Management, lead project partner of the Innoplatform project, was a prototype mask, which could be effectively disinfected after use. This reduced the disposable material to just a single cotton pad filter.

The innovative design was also able to use unique 3D-printing techniques to make the equipment more durable. Although this in turn created mass production challenges.

As part of the trial production, in five days 20 sets of equipment were created and donated through the Humanitarian Action Group to the Infectious Diseases Clinic, Skopje.

This project is financed by the Interreg BalkanMed programme 2014-2020



Enabling social distancing in hospitals

The MEDIWARN project developed remote sensors, which transmit data to another location, enabled health workers to monitor infected patients from a safe distance.

Eight of ten biosensors developed by the MEDIWARN project, were deployed in the Infectious Diseases Operating Unit of the San Marco hospital in Catania, Sicily.

These sensors enable medical staff to monitor infected patients from a safe distance, without exposing themselves to the risk of infection.

*This project is financed by INTERREG VA Italy Malta 2014-2020.
Image reproduced from www.catanianews.it*



The hospital that knows no border

While protection measures used by Member States closed borders, the cross-border hospital Cerdanya continued to serve its local population - both in France and Spain.

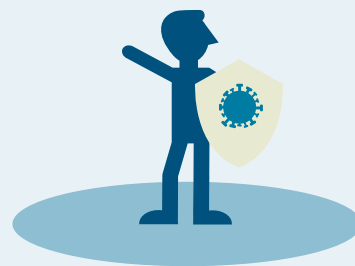
For the Cerdanya Hospital in the Pyrenees, its 35,000 local residents live on both sides of the border, as do its staff.

Exemptions to allow the hospital and its staff to continue to work were vital to ensure health care for those living in the region.

Exchanges with other hospitals were also arranged to enable the best possible healthcare, in extremely challenging times.



The cross-border hospital was created following an Interreg project feasibility study which guaranteed its cross-border vision and added value.



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