

Learning from the COVID-19

experience:

Strengthening EU-ANSA Agencies'

cooperation and preparedness to

support evidence-based policymaking

in times of crisis



Print	TM-01-21-515-EN-C	doi:10.2805/338459	ISBN 978-92-9499-408-0
PDF	TM-01-21-515-EN-N	doi:10.2805/402212	ISBN 978-92-9499-407-3

Luxembourg: Publications Office
of the European Union, 2022

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Printed by Publications Office in Luxembourg

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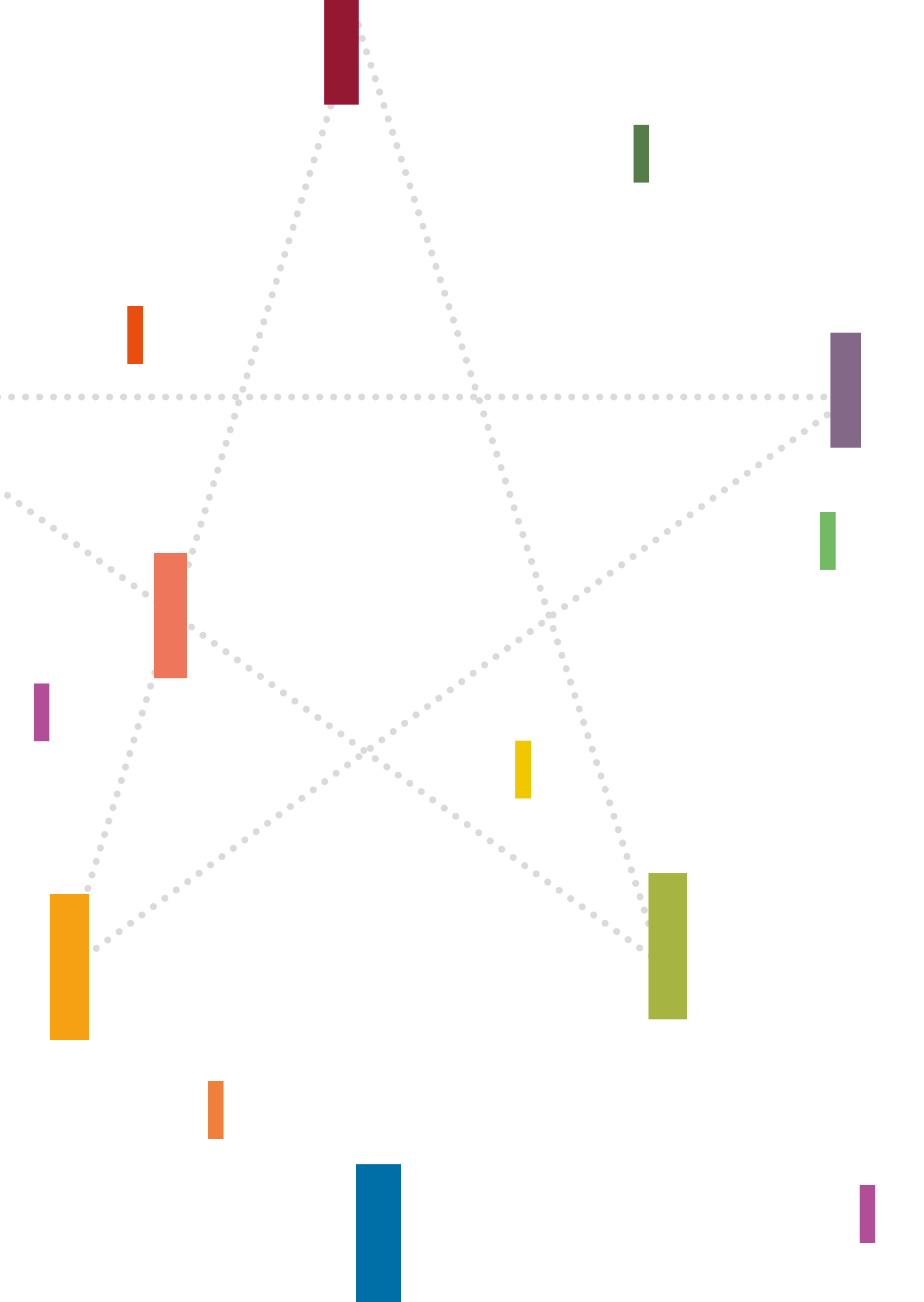
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Foreword

The COVID-19 pandemic brought unprecedented changes to our society, affecting the way we live, work, shop, travel and interact. To respond quickly to the health, social and economic disruptions and protect its citizens and businesses, the European Union relied on the scientific knowledge and advice provided by its agencies. This report is based on the challenges of producing risk assessments and scientific advice under time pressure and the considerable uncertainty faced by the EU agencies that support evidence-based policymaking. It provides a set of key recommendations to enhance the collective value of the agencies to policymakers.

The report includes examples that showcase some of the many ways in which the agencies joined forces and worked collaboratively, to support the European Commission, the EU Member States and a wide range of stakeholders in responding to the pandemic and building back better. The authors emphasise that the agencies are ready to further strengthen their cooperation and improve preparations for future threats of any kind, all while providing an exceptional source of expertise and networks for foresight activities. We endorse the agencies' call for policymakers to capitalise on their combined and complementary knowledge, skills and expertise, as well as their agility in coping with pressure. We believe that a comprehensive and integrated approach to deliver scientific advice for policymaking is paramount to equip the EU to fulfil its aspiration to become stronger, more resilient and more sustainable.

The Troika representing the EU Agencies Network's Chairmanship:

Hans Bruyninckx (Executive Director, European Environment Agency)

Fausto Parente (Executive Director, European Insurance and Occupational Pensions Authority)

Johannes Schwemmer (Director, Fusion for Energy)

Executive Summary

The European Union Agencies Network for Scientific Advice (EU-ANSA) consists of the EU agencies that support evidence-based policymaking by providing scientific advice to EU policymakers. Their knowledge and expertise encompass various areas of the everyday lives of EU citizens. The COVID-19 pandemic, which affected the way we all live, work and interact, has tested the resilience, flexibility and coordination of these agencies, both individually and collectively.

EU-ANSA conducted a survey on COVID-19-related activities and the associated challenges and opportunities. The survey revealed that the agencies adapted quickly to the pandemic by changing their ways of working and modifying their operational processes. Through their individual and collective actions, the agencies contributed to the response to COVID-19 in their work areas, providing the required knowledge and relevant advice to help EU and national decision-makers. Risk managers, members of the media, health workers and the public were informed about the virus – how it spreads, its symptoms and its consequences – and were provided with evidence-based guidance and advice regarding response options. The private sector was supported with the creation of COVID-specific guidance and training for delivering goods and services, thus ensuring business continuity. The agencies continue to systematically monitor, collect data, analyse and review the scientific evidence available to help policymakers navigate through the crisis – as well as prepare for our life after the pandemic and assist the full recovery of the EU, for the benefit of all European citizens and businesses.

The survey also highlighted a strong EU-ANSA willingness to learn from the crisis and capitalise on the agencies' experiences, in order to further enhance how they collaborate with each other and with their European and national stakeholders. The agencies have proposed several ideas to strengthen support to policymakers in crisis management, emphasising the benefits of increasing cooperation and improving their preparedness for future crises.

This reflection paper presents the EU-ANSA recommendations on how the agencies could enhance their added value to policymakers. EU-ANSA advocates for strengthened cooperation and preparedness of its agencies, which will be key to support evidence-based policymaking for the EU to emerge stronger from the pandemic. EU-ANSA stands ready to help build a stronger, greener, more resilient, more sustainable and more competitive Europe.

Introduction

Over the past decades, the EU has established agencies whose respective mandates and missions, founded by EU law, were formulated in response to a specific need or a particular challenge, often following a crisis. Through their combined knowledge and actions, these agencies contribute to the implementation of EU policies and strive for the development of a safer and more sustainable, inclusive and competitive Europe for the benefit of all EU citizens. To this end, enhancing the value of single agencies by deepening their collaboration serves the objective of providing EU citizens, businesses and institutions with a solid foundation to achieve their priorities. In doing so, the collaborating agencies represent a resourceful backbone for the implementation of EU policies. This is the case for EU-ANSA, which brings together those agencies that provide scientific advice to EU policymakers on areas that are relevant to many aspects of the daily lives of European citizens, from public health and the environment to gender equality and border control.

Notwithstanding their diverse remits, the network members share the same core activity. Building on their expertise, they collect, collate, generate and use current scientific and technical knowledge and coordinate its appraisal, in order to communicate evidence-based advice that will support EU institutions, national governments and authorities in their decision-making processes.

The COVID-19 pandemic impacted citizens and businesses worldwide. Although the EU has faced several crises in the past, none were of the nature and scale of COVID-19, which encompass most, if not all, aspects of our everyday lives (see Box 1).

BOX 1 (BASED ON EEA, 2022) (1)

COVID-19 – not only a health crisis!

Health crises like the COVID-19 pandemic have far-reaching implications for people and the society at large. The global community will need years, if not decades, to assess the full extent of the pandemic and its implications for our society, including its impacts on inequalities, health and the well-being of citizens.

Among other considerations, the pandemic is a stark reminder that our identity is deeply entangled with that of the Earth's ecosystems. The sense of urgency accompanying COVID-19 appears to open a window of opportunity. Reflecting on the unprecedented mobilisation and impact of responses to COVID-19 should inspire new ways of thinking, communicating, building trust and helping the transition to sustainability. We should not merely respond in crisis mode, but rather anticipate and respond to chronic issues, such as unsustainable human production and consumption, to avoid being caught up by the next crisis.

We have also learned from COVID-19 that contemporary societies are in fact able to 'act with the necessary force' when required. To address the sustainability problem, we will need to make tremendous social and economic changes: the way we live our lives and the way we eat, move and power our societies cannot remain as they are.

Unprecedented national lockdowns, travel restrictions and the closing of national borders in the first half of 2020 have led to short-term improvements in the environment in Europe. Reductions in traffic, shipping and aviation led to unprecedented improvements in air quality and noise levels, with the concentration of nitrogen dioxide in some cities declining by up to 60 % compared with the same period in 2019. At the same time, the need for protective and other disposable equipment led to an increase in the production and consumption of plastics, and thus plastic waste.

Citizens were not alone in having to change their habits. Policymakers also had to react quickly to the pandemic and its socio-economic impacts. The European Commission responded swiftly with NextGenerationEU, a recovery plan to 'help build a post-COVID-19 EU that is greener, more digital, more resilient and better fit for the current and forthcoming challenges'. Taken together with the EU's long-term budget, the volume of resources mobilised for the climate and environment is unprecedented and the EU agencies – working together – are ready to support the necessary policy changes with robust scientific advice.

The President of the European Commission, in her State of the Union speech in September 2020, not only called for the NextGenerationEU recovery package, but advocated for a stronger European Health Union and made concrete suggestions to strengthen our crisis preparedness and management of cross-border health threats. First, by reinforcing and empowering the European Medicines Agency (EMA) and the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) and, as a second step, by building a European agency for biomedical advanced research and development. Only a few months later the Commission proposed a regulation for cross-border health threats ⁽²⁾, to replace the previous decision on cross-border threats, and one year later adopted a decision establishing the Health Emergency Preparedness and Response Authority ⁽³⁾. It is noteworthy that in the proposal for cross-border health threats, there are no less than six agencies that can be called upon to carry out a risk assessment.

In the meantime, all of the EU-ANSA network members reacted and adapted quickly to this health crisis, to help the European Commission and Member States respond in a timely manner to the unprecedented challenges imposed by the pandemic. Despite the common challenges, the lack of knowledge and data and the complexity and urgency of the public health threat, the agencies showed flexibility and resilience to generate and share knowledge to inform EU and national policies. A compilation of the COVID-19-related outputs produced in 2020 by the agencies is available on the EU Agencies Network website – and complemented by further outputs produced in 2021 that are available in Appendix B of the EU-ANSA survey report ⁽⁴⁾. These compilations include joint guidelines and scientific advice that were produced in cooperation among the agencies ⁽⁵⁾ ⁽⁶⁾.

However, these successful outcomes should not be taken for granted. In 2020, the European Court of Auditors carried out its first overall assessment of how all of the EU agencies have been able to effectively deliver on policies in the interest of EU citizens. The audit suggested that the Commission and the agencies could further 'strengthen the role of agencies as centres of expertise and networking' ⁽⁷⁾. Assessing how agencies can contribute more effectively to EU policies is essential for the future of Europe, because Europe relies on these agencies more than ever – especially in times of crisis ⁽⁸⁾.

Alex Brenninkmeijer, reporting Member of the European Court of Auditors, said: ‘Cooperation between EU agencies also needs to reach another level. So far, synergies have been sought primarily in horizontal administrative processes such as IT and HR. Policy coordination and cooperation is a more promising area, and EU agencies can share views and need to learn to find their voice. In short, policy cooperation is crucial to EU agencies’ success, and needs to be fostered by their institutional partners. As far as EU citizens are concerned, individual EU agencies succeed only if the policy as a whole succeeds’ (3).

Therefore, the COVID-19 crisis should be used to reflect on the challenges faced by the agencies, to learn from their experiences and to explore opportunities to strengthen inter-agency preparation and cooperation, particularly for future emergencies. To this end, EU-ANSA conducted a survey on activities related to COVID-19 and associated challenges and opportunities, whose results were published recently (4).

This reflection paper summarises the key findings of the survey and elaborates on the network’s recommendations to prepare for future emergencies through coordinated collaboration among its members and strengthening agencies’ preparedness. It also highlights examples of good practice from selected EU-ANSA members.

Survey findings and recommendations

The survey findings confirmed that the EU-ANSA members adapted with remarkable speed to the pandemic, by altering their ways of working and by revising the processes to manage and support their staff. This enabled them to participate in the response to COVID-19, often on their own initiative. The agencies used the crisis as an opportunity for new ways of cooperation, both within their own organisation and with other agencies (see Case study 1) and EU bodies (see Case study 2), putting together knowledge for the generation and communication of outputs to inform policy.

CASE STUDY 1

EMA and ECDC strengthening public health advice on COVID-19

During the COVID-19 pandemic, cooperation between the EMA and the ECDC has intensified considerably. In addition to mutual participation in relevant meetings (such as the inclusion of an ECDC representative in the EMA pandemic task force meetings) and more extensive exchange of data and assessment outcomes (such as obtaining data through ECDC on disease burden and vaccination rollout status in the EU to support EMA assessments), close collaboration in the area of communication led to the publication of common EMA and ECDC public health statements ⁽¹⁰⁾.

The statements were made to clarify various aspects related to the use of COVID-19 vaccines, by bringing together the regulatory and public health policy perspectives. These public health communications reflected science-based positions agreed by ECDC and EMA scientific groups and were particularly important in the context of urgency and the rapidly changing situation, where deferring communication until the conclusion of formal regulatory procedures based on submission of complete data from companies would not have been appropriate. They were targeted at the general public, members of the media and healthcare professionals to convey the latest information and address any misconceptions that may have existed. They also facilitated the oversight of information that is relevant for national vaccination policies. Based on this experience, cooperation between EMA and ECDC will be further enhanced and is also foreseen in the extended EMA mandate that has been adopted in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The survey also indicated a strong willingness to further strengthen the inter-agency cooperation to increase resilience and improve agencies' preparedness for future crises. Useful reflections were gathered on the need for and benefits of inter-agency cooperation, highlighting that coordination structures, collaboration, training, staff and systems will need to be enhanced. The survey documented an appetite for a joint crisis preparedness exercise that aims to establish trust-based and efficient working relations and better communication and coordination of the existing networks, expertise and tools (see Case study 3). Ultimately, this will improve knowledge generation to support policymakers in effective crisis management. EU agencies also avail of a rich body of expertise and networks that can strengthen the EU's capacity for modelling and foresight of serious cross-border threats to health.

The ECDC-JRC Response Measures Database

Since the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, the ECDC and the JRC have collaborated to maintain and curate the ECDC-JRC Response Measures Database ⁽¹¹⁾. This repository gathers information on non-pharmaceutical interventions (NPI) implemented since 1 January 2020 in Member States and European Economic Area countries in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The NPI data collection and validation is overseen by ECDC through 2-week cycles, whereas the dissemination of the database is supported by both JRC and ECDC in their respective webpages and in different formats to facilitate various uses of the database. In addition to offering this resource to the scientific community, ECDC and JRC use it to develop modelling-based forecasts to inform policy and to feed regular and ad hoc outputs with information on the different NPIs implemented by Member States and European Economic Area countries during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The survey concluded with a series of recommendations for agencies to work together to:

1. Test operating procedures, establish crisis preparedness and crisis management contact points and plan for an inter-agency crisis preparedness exercise that will likely take place in 2023.
2. Prepare for inter-agency platform for knowledge and information sharing of priority signals identified in agencies horizon scanning, analysis of monitoring data or intelligence gathering.
 - a. The platform can be enhanced by ad hoc quick activation in case of crisis, on the call of one or few agencies which may have important alerts to share.
 - b. The agencies can come together and evaluate early warning signals to discuss how the different agencies may be impacted and how to respond. This can include ensuring specific agency responses are complementary and options considered for inter-agency cooperation.
 - c. Such collective preparedness will be a useful interface for EU agencies' and Commission's work on foresight and improve early information exchange, enhance data use, as well as communication with different stakeholders.
3. Consider to create a European Union Agencies Network policy for cooperation in times of crises (e.g. access to expertise, sharing/redistributing tasks across agencies, temporarily reallocate/second staff during crises).
4. Advocate and promote training opportunities for science policy interface, such as the ones offered by the Joint Research Centre of the European Commission (JRC) – and enhance training in the field of crisis preparedness and joint seminars among agencies ⁽¹²⁾.

Supporting enterprises during the pandemic to keep workers safe

As many countries introduced strict COVID-19 confinement measures, the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA) developed guidance for the approximately 25 million enterprises in the EU that employ more than 130 million people. Partnering with national, sectoral and European agencies has been key to the success of these activities and has enhanced cooperation across policy fields.

Initial guidance helped organisations to put measures in place and to ensure that occupational safety and health (OSH) requirements were fulfilled, all while respecting compulsory public health measures. EU-OSHA and ECDC cooperated on several assessments that addressed protection in essential jobs, such as in long-term care facilities, healthcare and schools. Cooperation also addressed outbreaks in occupational settings such as slaughterhouses, along with the protection of workers at mink farms and other similar settings.

Later, a 'Back to Work guide' advised employers to revise their workplace risk assessment and adapt workplaces and the organisation of work without creating new risks. This document includes links to hundreds of national guidance documents, mostly at the sectoral level, from public health and OSH organisations. A simple risk assessment tool was provided to small and medium-sized enterprises. Since spring 2020, the guide has been downloaded nearly 110 000 times and the dedicated webpage has been accessed by nearly 230 000 users ⁽¹³⁾.

In spring 2021, EU-OSHA and ECDC carried out a joint assessment of rapid antigen testing routines and requirements in a workplace context. The report highlighted the value of testing to avoid the spread of the virus in high-risk indoor settings. It also stressed the importance of involving authorities, workers, employers and occupational health services when developing a testing strategy for the workplace. Good cooperation between occupational safety and health and public health actors is vital to ensuring everyone is protected.

Conclusions

EU-ANSA represents a robust source of scientific knowledge and expertise, on which the European Commission and Member States can rely to manage and plan the recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. EU agencies, individually and collectively, have already delivered a multitude of evidence-based advice for the benefit of European citizens and businesses. They also gained visibility during the crisis, reporting more interactions with policy and stakeholders, along with frequent consultations of COVID-19-related news and guidance that they published.

This reflection paper reasserts that EU agencies are mature and are prepared to cooperate further, particularly in times of crisis. They will collaborate to increase preparedness for future threats, including through common crisis exercises, sharing expertise through foresight activities and the other recommendations mentioned above. It encourages policymakers to capitalise on the added value of the EU agencies – not only of each agency individually, but also on the demonstrated value that they bring collectively – in order to provide a more holistic response to global threats such as COVID-19. The authors advocate for a strengthened inter-agency approach in support of the delivery of scientific advice to policymakers to build a stronger, more resilient Europe.

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Publications Office
of the European Union

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