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**REPORT FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND
THE COUNCIL**

on the implementation of the Western Mediterranean initiative

1. INTRODUCTION – BACKGROUND

In April 2017, the Commission adopted the ‘Communication on the Initiative for the sustainable development of the blue economy in the Western Mediterranean’ (‘WestMED initiative’ or ‘the initiative’) along with its Framework for action¹. The initiative was formally endorsed in November the same year by the ten participating countries: five EU Member States (France, Italy, Portugal, Spain and Malta), and five southern partner countries (Algeria, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco and Tunisia) at a dedicated Ministerial Conference in Naples².

The initiative is a direct outcome of the [Euro-Mediterranean Ministerial Declaration on the Blue Economy](#) adopted at the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) conference held in November 2015. The conference invited participating countries to explore the added value and feasibility of appropriate maritime strategies at sub-regional level. The initiative also builds on years of ‘5+5 Dialogue’ between the ten participating countries.

The WestMED initiative is fully in line with other relevant EU policies linked to the region, such as the European neighbourhood policy. It became the second EU sea basin strategy (following the Atlantic maritime strategy), promoting maritime cooperation at a larger regional scale.

The initiative contributes to the objectives of the Convention for the Protection of the Marine Environment and the Coastal Region of the Mediterranean (the Barcelona Convention); the Mediterranean action plan; and the 2016-2025 Mediterranean strategy for sustainable development. It also contributes to the outcomes of the 21st Meeting of the Contracting Parties to the Barcelona Convention held in December 2019, committing to taking tangible action to protect the Mediterranean Sea and providing support for a sustainable blue economy and an ecological transition in the region.

The WestMED initiative is also relevant for the General Fisheries Commission for the Mediterranean (GFCM) and its recently adopted 2030 strategy. The GFCM strategy offers a common vision and guiding principles to achieve sustainable fisheries and aquaculture in the Mediterranean region.

The 10 countries undertook to work together on their shared interest for the Mediterranean around three goals: (1) increase maritime safety and security, (2) promote sustainable blue economy, growth and jobs, and (3) preserve ecosystems and biodiversity.

For each goal, a number of priorities and targeted actions were set, as indicated in the framework for action accompanying the initiative:

1. Coastguard functions cooperation (training, capacity building, search and rescue)
2. Maritime safety and response to marine pollution rescue
3. Strategic research and innovation
4. Maritime clusters development

¹ COM(2017) 183 final.

²<https://www.westmed-initiative.eu/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/1.Declaration-of-Algiers-04.12.2018-EN.pdf>

5. Skills development and circulation
6. Sustainable consumption and production (maritime transport, ports, maritime and coastal tourism, marine aquaculture)
7. Maritime Spatial Planning (MSP) and coastal management.
8. Marine and maritime knowledge
9. Biodiversity and marine habitat conservation
10. Sustainable fisheries and coastal community development

In December 2018, in Algiers, the ministers from the WesternMED countries, together with the Commission and the UfM, adopted a declaration and a roadmap for action which stressed the need to focus on 6³ of the 10 priorities listed above. The importance of the WestMED initiative was reconfirmed with the [second UfM Ministerial Declaration](#) on Sustainable Blue Economy, adopted on 2 February 2021⁴.

Governance

The WestMED Steering Committee, or WMSC, provides high-level stewardship for the implementation of the framework for action. It ensures operational coordination, provides guidance and support to ensure the initiative's expected results are achieved, and monitors its implementation. The WMSC includes national coordinators from the relevant ministries from the participating countries, the Commission and the UfM, together with observers.

The WestMED Assistance Mechanism is financed through the European Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund (EMFAF)⁵. It works closely with the Steering Committee and its technical working groups by offering operational, logistical and administrative support. The Assistance Mechanism also offers practical project support – mainly in the form of partner matchmaking and project development – through their representatives in nine national hubs.

The national hubs are teams of national experts with an extensive network and sound knowledge of funding opportunities, who can identify areas of high potential and help develop project ideas. The national hubs offer confidential and tailored guidance on project development, funding opportunities and partner matchmaking, and are able to address local priorities.

Obligation to report

The WestMED initiative has been in place for 5 years. According to the 2017 communication, the Commission ‘will report on the implementation of this initiative to the Council and the European Parliament by 2022 based on countries’ reporting.’ The Commission must also ensure that the initiative is still aligned with current EU objectives and policies. To that end, the Commission requested an independent assessment of the

³ 1. Maritime cluster development, 2. Biodiversity and marine habitat conservation and restoration, 3. Sustainable consumption and production, 4. The development of coastal communities and sustainable fisheries and aquaculture, 5. Skills development and circulation, and 6. Maritime safety and the fight against marine pollution.

⁴ <https://ufmsecretariat.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Declaration-UfM-Blue-Economy-EN-1.pdf>

⁵ Previously the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund.

initiative that looked at its objectives, successes and challenges. The assessment took the form of a review study.

2. THE REVIEW STUDY

The Commission contracted an independent review study on the implementation of the WestMED initiative to support the present report. In September 2021, the contractor began work to help determine whether the goals and targets of the initiative had been met, or whether they needed updating to better match current priorities. To that end, the contractor considered four key perspectives: strategic insights; evaluation of the governance level and the priorities; evaluation of the initiative and the role of the Assistance Mechanism; and the observers' perspective.

The study was conducted between October 2021 and April 2022. It included desk research along with a targeted consultation in which stakeholders, members of the WestMED Steering Committee, WestMED co-chairs and members of the Assistance Mechanism were all interviewed, ensuring full representation of the interested parties as well as geographical balance. Prior to the interviews, questionnaires were sent to WestMED member countries) and the responses largely fed into the review study.

The Commission drafted the present report after careful analysis of the feedback received via the questionnaires and the review study, and after consulting the WestMED Steering Committee. A number of conclusions and various recommendations are set out below.

3. OUTCOMES: STRENGTHS AND NECESSARY IMPROVEMENTS

In its 5 years of existence, the initiative has proved to be a useful intergovernmental platform for promoting sustainable blue economy sectors across the Western Mediterranean with its bottom-up approach. Members of the initiative and observers to the governing body (the Steering Committee) perceive it as a robust forum for dialogue and cooperation. Notably, the dedicated stakeholder conferences and hackathons have gathered together hundreds of participants from the region.

The COVID-19 pandemic challenged the functioning and governance of the initiative, as most meetings had to be virtual. Nevertheless, great progress was made, partly due to the efforts made by the WestMED co-chairs. The initiative has shown continuous support for projects and project proposals; it successfully created two technical groups on sustainable aquaculture and green shipping; it informed relevant EMFF/EMFAF calls for proposals delegated to CINEA⁶; and it entered into key partnerships by signing a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with Interreg and the Association of the Mediterranean Chambers of Commerce and Industry (ASCAME).

Although certain aspects of the initiative can be improved (enhancing visibility, developing more suitable indicators to measure progress and clarifying some of the existing priorities), these can be tackled under the current governance of the initiative.

⁶ European Climate, Infrastructure and Environment Executive Agency.

3.1. Strengths and added value

The WestMED initiative has demonstrated progress and success, justifying its creation and continuation. Six key strengths were observed:

- dialogue and soft diplomacy
- cooperation and partnerships
- project support
- knowledge sharing
- technical working groups and alliances
- broader Mediterranean cooperation

3.1.1. *Dialogue and soft diplomacy*

The WestMED initiative has been instrumental in supporting the needs of the member countries, largely through the support of the Assistance Mechanism and the framework of soft diplomacy that has been established and that facilitates dialogue among its members on shared challenges and opportunities. The participatory and inclusive process is greatly appreciated by stakeholders. The initiative successfully reflects the diversity of needs and challenges in the region.

As a forum for political dialogue and exchange, the WestMED initiative relies heavily on the active involvement of a network of local stakeholders from the participating countries. The stakeholder conferences and hackathons organised by the WestMED initiative – mostly to facilitate the exchange of project ideas and promote specific project development among regional stakeholders in the maritime sectors – have consolidated its position as a proven and effective tool for promoting contacts between countries which otherwise have limited means of cooperation or experience political tensions.

The work of the WestMED technical groups and the maritime clusters has substantially contributed to strengthening dialogue across the participating countries and their maritime stakeholders.

3.1.2. *Cooperation and partnerships*

In monitoring relevant funding opportunities in the blue economy, the Assistance Mechanism has established specific means of collaboration with institutional donors, notably Interreg. The 2021-2027 regulatory framework for Cohesion Funds contains explicit provisions on the embedding of sea-basin strategies. A roadmap for liaising activities was created between Interreg Euro-MED (2021-27) and the WestMED initiative. It will increase coordination between players in the Mediterranean and help to create partnerships.

To support partnerships between the WestMED and relevant regional associations, the Assistance Mechanism signed a MoU with ASCAME in 2021. The objective of the MoU is to establish a robust collaboration framework to promote the blue economy, ensure a safer maritime space, and improve maritime governance in the region. Some of the actions planned comprise joint initiatives and promote dialogue and cooperation. Collaboration with ASCAME will strengthen the initiative's links with the private sector, leading to increased matchmaking and project support activities. Additionally, the MoU facilitates knowledge transfer between relevant private- public actors.

Looking forward, the Assistance Mechanism might want to explore enhancing cooperation and even project proposals from new partners or sources of funding. This could be done in the context of Horizon Europe, the public-public EU Sustainable Blue Economy Partnership⁷ and the EU Mission: Restore our Ocean and Waters, especially in relation to the Mediterranean Lighthouse with a 2030 horizon, targeting the prevention and elimination of pollution along with the protection and restoration of marine biodiversity and climate neutrality and circularity of the blue economy, facilitating also the commitment of relevant stakeholders to the objectives of the Mission.

3.1.3. Project support

The WestMED initiative has supported member countries in developing project proposals, many of which were successful in obtaining funding. This has been greatly appreciated by the countries.

So far, 79 projects ideas have been actively supported by the initiative's central team and national hubs. They are worth a total of about EUR 92 million⁸. Additionally, more than 160 projects are aligned with the initiative and involve around 600 partners from the member countries.

Examples of significant projects supported over the last 4 years are set out in the **Table 1**. This is by no means a comprehensive list⁹.

Table 1: summary of key projects supported by the Assistance Mechanism

Name	Objective	Source	Amount (EUR)
DESTIMED PLUS	Promotion of integrated planning on coastal tourism	Interreg MED	3 076 000
DIGICIRC	European cluster-led accelerator for digitalisation of the circular economy across emerging sectors	Horizon 2020	3 755 000
PSAMIDES	Optimisation of port operation and marina management via innovative tools	Interreg MED	2 859 000
LIFE4MEDECA	Reduction of emissions within the ECA MED area	LIFE Programme	1 637 000
AFRIMED	Algal Forest Restoration in the Mediterranean	EMFF	1 858 000
WESTMOPOCO	Response preparedness for chemical spills	DG ECHO	868 000

WestMED Project Awards

The WestMED Project Awards (2021) were an opportunity to spotlight and support projects other than those actively supported by the Assistance Mechanism and national

⁷https://ec.europa.eu/research-and-innovation/sites/default/files/bmr-2022/ec_rtd_bmr-2022-blue-economy-fiche.pdf

⁸Reporting from the Assistance Mechanism.

⁹Full list: <https://westmed-initiative.ec.europa.eu/publications/#Leaflets>

hubs. The aim was to identify, showcase and honour exceptional projects that provide innovative and replicable solutions in a range of areas, embodying the WestMED initiative’s vision for the Western Mediterranean. In 2021, a total of 54 interesting and valuable projects from both sides of the Mediterranean entered the competition.

The winner was the BLUESKILLS project ‘Blue Jobs and Sustainable Economy in the Mediterranean throughout Enhancing Skills and Developing Capacities’, funded by the Italian Ministry of University and Research and led by the Italian National Institute of Oceanography and Applied Geophysics. The project promotes opportunities in ‘blue’ careers by developing skills, exchanging knowledge and valorising research for a more sustainable Mediterranean Sea. Its aim is to develop new curricula and increase employability in the marine and maritime sectors. Other finalists are listed in **Table 2**.

Table 2: 2021 WestMED Project Awards finalists

Name	Objective	Source	Amount (EUR)
BLUESKILLS	<i>Promotes opportunities in ‘blue’ careers</i>	<i>Italian National Funds</i>	N/A
ALGERIA START UP CHALLENGE	Support Algerian aquaculture and environmental protection start-ups (focus on youth)	Algerian National Funds	N/A
SICOMAR plus	Cross border cooperation project on maritime safety	Interreg France-Italy maritime programme	6 688 000
BIOVecQ	Promotes bilateral cooperation between Italian and Tunisian research centres on blue biotechnology	Interreg Italy-Tunisia	1 722 000
STARFISH 4.0	Innovative solutions for the modernisation and digitalisation of small-scale fisheries	EMFF	1 158 000

EMFAF call for flagship projects 2021

In an effort to boost and streamline funds, the first EMFAF call for flagship projects on the blue economy focusing on the sea basin was launched in 2021. It included a specific call for WestMED countries. The call was devoted to the recovery of coastal and maritime tourism. It aimed to strengthen the competitiveness and sustainability of the coastal and maritime tourism sector as part of a smart and resilient blue economy. The topic also focuses on ecotourism, digitalisation of the sector and mobilising private-public investments. Three projects worth EUR 2 385 000 were awarded and are ongoing.

Table 3: Projects awarded through EMFAF calls for flagship projects in WestMED countries

Name	Objective	EU contribution (EUR)
ECO-CRUIISING FU TOUR	Boost managerial, blue and digital skills in the Western Mediterranean tourism sector with a focus on SMEs	792 177
EU WeMED_NaTOUR	Develop transnational, eco-smart tourism packages, with a focus on natural marine sites/coastal destinations	796 683
REBOOT MED	Recovering and boosting ecotourism: encourage public-private partnership co-defining Blue Economy Action Plans for the Recovery of the tourism sector	999 380

3.1.4. *Knowledge sharing*

The WestMED initiative has been a successful and inspirational forum for knowledge sharing. Member countries have had the possibility to learn from one another and share best practice and reliable methods to shape policy, leading to a more sustainable blue economy. A clear example of this is the Algerian blue economy strategy.

In 2021, Algeria became the first southern Mediterranean country to have a national blue economy strategy, looking ahead to the next ten years. This strategy identifies the needs, themes, activities and priority actions required to build an integrated and sustainable maritime economy that is beneficial for all. The strategy also covers cross-border aspects of the blue economy.

The Algerian blue economy strategy was inspired by the WestMED initiative, together with the ideas and goals explored at the various multilevel events and among regional partners, ministers and steering committees. The Assistance Mechanism also provided specific support in this process. In fact, the Algerian national hub and WestMED Assistance Mechanism played a crucial role and helped national authorities in the finalisation and presentation of the Algerian blue economy strategy. The EU supports the strategy by providing EUR 22 million for the development of the blue economy in Algeria.

The Algerian blue economy strategy is fully integrated into the Algerian government's overall vision and contributes to the WestMED and UfM objectives..

Ultimately, it may inspire other countries to develop similar strategies. For example, Tunisia is currently working on a strategy to be adopted in 2022.

3.1.5. *Technical working groups and alliances*

In 2020, the WestMED created a technical group on green shipping. The group is led by the Italian and Moroccan national hubs, and composed of experts, specialists and representatives from all of the WestMED countries. The group has identified three key actions on the topics of sustainable maritime transport and alternative fuels:

- i) assess emerging technologies and innovative models;
- ii) create a network of maritime ports as energy communities;
- iii) help boost the adaptation of commercial vessels.

AquaWest, a technical group on sustainable aquaculture, was set up in 2021 to support the adoption of innovative and sustainable aquaculture practices in the Western Mediterranean. The group focuses on the needs and opportunities of the southern WestMED countries, allowing them to benefit from existing innovative practices in the region. The group consists of a number of high-level policymakers and organisations from the aquaculture sector and is led by the Algerian national hub. The group's main objectives are to:

- i) promote knowledge sharing;
- ii) facilitate policy development;
- iii) encourage stakeholder cooperation;
- iv) identify funding;
- v) maintain an information-sharing platform.

In 2021 a network of maritime clusters was set up, signed in Italy and led by the Tunisian cluster. The network's main objectives are to:

- i) encourage discussion and the exchange of knowledge and practices among clusters;
- ii) boost the development of southern Mediterranean maritime clusters through closer south-south cooperation;
- iii) North-south capacity building to help upgrade cluster management skills between the northern and southern Mediterranean;
- iv) attract investment – particularly private investments for innovative SMEs.

3.1.6. *Broader Mediterranean cooperation*

The WestMED initiative has not just inspired and increased both cooperation and discussion among its member countries, it has also led to broader cooperation across the rest of the Mediterranean. This has taken the form of project collaboration between EU shore and non-EU countries that are not WestMED members.

Table 4: Examples of projects supported by the WestMED Assistance Mechanism involving non-WestMED countries

Name	Sector	Objective	Countries	Source	Budget (EUR)
BLUEfasma	Circular economy	Integrate circular economy principles into fishing/aquaculture and coastal/maritime tourism to benefit insular, island and coastal areas in the Mediterranean	MT GR CY HR MTN	INTERREG MED	2 812 000
Psamides	Ports	Optimise port operation and marina management through innovative tools	FR ES GR MTN HR	INTERREG MED	2 859 000
ODYSSEA	R&I	Operate cost-effective platforms that integrate networks for observation/forecasting systems across the Mediterranean	MA DZ IT FR TN ES EG PT IL UK DE NL TR GR	H2020	8 399 000

In an effort to further involve other Mediterranean countries, in 2022 for the first time, EMFAF flagship calls that were normally only available to WestMED countries are open to all UfM countries thereby, following the example set by the WestMED itself, incorporating other Mediterranean nations in terms of projects.

The BlueMed Initiative for a healthy and plastic-free Mediterranean comprised both EU and non-EU countries, including WestMED countries. It aimed to advance a shared vision for a healthier and resilient Mediterranean Sea, promoting the social well-being and prosperity of future generations. It developed a Mediterranean-specific Strategic Research and Innovation Agenda, listing key challenges in the Mediterranean, knowledge gaps, activities enabling blue growth and measures for skill enhancement in various sectors.

In 2022, the Commission published a new Guidance document on synergies between Horizon Europe and the European Regional Development Fund programmes.

There is now the possibility for cumulative funding, i.e. an operation/project can receive support from more than one fund, programme or instrument for the same cost item or expenditure allowing up to 100% of funding.

Looking forward, the WestMED Initiative will cooperate with the recently launched coordination and support action, BlueMissionMed, funded under the Mission “Restore our Ocean and waters by 2030”.

3.2. Areas where improvement can be considered

Although the added value demonstrated by the WestMED initiative is clear, there is room for improvement in the following areas.

3.2.1. Raising awareness and enhancing visibility

The current communication strategy is somewhat outdated. A better use of the logo for visibility purposes is necessary, to better showcase the work, progress and success of the initiative.

Solution: Improve the communication strategy and make better use of the WestMED logo as a brand.

A tailored communication strategy would help make the WestMED initiative be more visible. Activities and progress would be more evident and more accessible to the public. This communication strategy could be developed by collaborating with EU delegations in non-EU countries based in the Mediterranean. This would increase visibility and could attract new investment and create a greater leverage effect in projects and grants to develop these.

More effective branding would help: demonstrate the endorsement of participating countries; increase traction of the branded projects; find project partners; assist the branded projects in enlisting support from governments and stakeholders across the region; and make access to financing opportunities easier. The WestMED initiative should seek to emulate the work done by the UfM's successful branding campaign.

The new Assistance Mechanism should help produce an improved communication strategy. According to its terms of reference, the consortium responsible for the Assistance Mechanism is required to present a communication strategy and action plan for implementing this, which will be reviewed every 6 months.

The new Assistance Mechanism can also support the introduction of the use of the logo as a brand. This will be key to defining standard branding for WestMED-supported projects and joint initiatives indicating WestMED endorsement when applying for funding. Having clear guidelines on the use and applicability of the logo will ensure that all member countries use it consistently. The Commission can facilitate the process by sharing knowledge on standardised guidelines.

3.2.2. Refining performance metrics and indicators

Refining current performance metrics and indicators will improve accuracy when measuring the success and extent of the actions carried out under the WestMED initiative.

Other than in relation to policy development and the contribution by WestMED, individual actions corresponding to each of the initiative's 10 priorities are not linked to the specific targets set out in the current framework for action.

Many of the targets listed are too broad to be attributed solely to the activities of the initiative. The targets are primarily quantitative in nature, yet many of the initiative's achievements to date are not easily measurable.

Solution: reformulate and adopt alternative performance metrics to monitor implementation.

The revised framework should comprise both qualitative and quantitative indicators. These should be relevant, comprehensive and easy to monitor and report on. Integrating relevant aspects within the specific indicators will ensure that changes in priorities can be easily tracked across the governance and implementation levels. It will also ensure that any new priorities are easily integrated into reporting and monitoring processes.

The terms of reference for the new Assistance Mechanism state that it should draw up criteria and indicators to monitor and measure the activities of the various sea basin strategies and any related outcomes. This will make it easier to address the issue for the WestMED initiative and its framework for action and roadmap for action.

3.2.3. *Reconfirming and streamlining priorities*

The WestMED initiative operates within a broad framework of international, Mediterranean and EU policies, agreements and strategies that relate to the sustainable blue economy.

The initiative's 3 overarching goals and 10 priorities align to a certain extent with regional and Mediterranean policies. For example, the WestMED initiative builds on the 2015 UfM Ministerial Declaration on the blue economy. However, WestMED priorities were set prior to the more recent second UfM Ministerial Declaration on a sustainable blue economy (2021).

Since the Declaration of Algiers was adopted in 2018, projects and proposals supported by the initiative have focused mainly on the 6 priorities outlined in the roadmap for action, rather than the 10 in the framework for action. The roadmap does not describe a specific way to implement the remaining priorities¹⁰. However, some progress has been made through the projects¹¹ and the latest hackathon held in June 2022. This hackathon showed a renewed interest in maritime spatial planning and coastal tourism. The WestMED Assistance Mechanism has been supporting networking events on Maritime Spatial Planning (including eastern Mediterranean countries) and will continue to do so, notably through a new group of experts on MSP set up through the MSP-Med project.

Solution: Reconfirm and streamline priorities based on regional and international priorities.

¹⁰I.e., coastguard functions cooperation, strategic research and innovation, spatial planning and coastal management, and marine/maritime knowledge exchange and synergies

¹¹E.g., the [FIUFFRA project](#) which promotes cooperation in the fight against IUU fishing

Recalibrating and aligning the initiative's priorities with the new regional and international policy initiatives would be useful. This could be done by building on the second UfM Ministerial Declaration on a sustainable blue economy. This was endorsed by the 42 UfM members and stresses the need to tackle the environmental and climate-related challenges facing the entire region.

These topics can be discussed in the next WestMED Ministerial meeting, due to be held in 2023.

4. RECOMMENDATIONS

As evidenced in this document, the WestMED initiative has so far been successful and has clearly advanced its goals under its three main priorities. Concrete examples of progress include the creation of technical groups, support for project matchmaking and project development, and the creation of various partnerships. More broadly, the WestMED initiative has noticeably led to improved cooperation and dialogue in the region among its member countries, and also beyond, by including other Mediterranean countries – both EU and non-EU members – in a wide range of projects.

Recommendation 1: Overall, the Commission recommends that the WestMED initiative and its accompanying framework for action remain as they are. The benefits described above prove their suitability. There is therefore no need for changes as potential improvements can be made without amending the current agreement.

Recommendation 2: The Commission recommends that the Assistance Mechanism should address issues such as increasing visibility; better use of project branding (e.g. logo); and improved, more appropriate metrics for evaluating the implementation of the initiative. As requested in the terms of reference, the new Assistance Mechanism should present a new communication strategy, working with EU Delegations in Mediterranean countries, and a new set of indicators to measure progress.

Recommendation 3: Priorities in relation to regional and international policies should be reviewed and streamlined, taking account of the second UfM Ministerial Declaration on a sustainable blue economy. The member countries can discuss this in the next Ministerial meeting, planned for 2023.

4.1. Looking forward

Following the presentation to the Council and European Parliament, this report will also be presented at the Ministerial meeting of the WestMED in 2023, in Malta. During this meeting, the countries can choose to reconfirm or update the priorities included in the current 2017 framework for action. They can also update those highlighted in the 2018 Algiers Declaration and roadmap for action.

The Commission proposes that another review study of the initiative be carried out by 2027. The next Commission report to the Council and European Parliament should also take account of reporting from WestMED countries.

The Commission will publicise and share this report among relevant institutions and interested parties.