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EDITORIAL ARTICLE

International cooperation in forensic sciences: The ICRIME project

Colaboración internacional en ciencias forenses: el proyecto ICRIME

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Public sector cooperation for development is considered part of Foreign Action Strategy as a reflection of the supportive nature of Spanish society, and as an expression of our country's commitment to Agenda 2030.

Within this conceptual framework, the Directive Plan for Spanish Cooperation (2018) sets out the guidelines which make it possible to identify the Ministry of Justice as one of the essential agents in Spanish Cooperation, accepting Sustainable Development Objective 16 of Agenda 2030 as its own (*Peace, Justice and Solid Institutions*).

To achieve these specific goals, Spanish Cooperation in the field of justice implements a very wide range of projects, coordinating with the Spanish Agency for Cooperation and Development (AECID), and in the majority of occasions with the collaboration of the Foundation for International and Latin American Administration and Public Policies (FIIAPP). Thus as well as more or less specific collaborations in the form of technical assistance—which by the end of the year involve major deployment of Spanish experts—twinning projects also stand out. In these projects, an institution of a member state of the European Union (EU) offers highly direct and sustained support (lasting from 6

months to 3 years) to an institute in a EU candidate or neighbouring country. Recently, since 2021, the European Commission has started to propose the implementation of twinning projects with other countries in the world.

Within the field of forensic science, the Ministry of Justice has led 2 twinning projects in Turkey, the first of which (2011–2013) was aimed to improve forensic capacities. The second Project, which is still being executed, aims to reinforce criminal investigation in these organisations.

In recent years, European cooperation has tended to concentrate on the design and award of major delegated cooperation projects to consortiums of member states; these projects often have a regional impact. They make it possible to design more ambitious logical frameworks, often over the longer term.

The ICRIME project, “Cooperation in Criminal Investigation in Central America to fight delinquency and drug trafficking at an international level”, is an example of programmes of this type.

To understand the scope of this Project, it is necessary to introduce the System of Central American Integration (SICA), which was formed in 1991 as the institutional framework for

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integration. Within this context, the countries in the region adopt a common strategy to combat violence and promote citizen safety, the Central America Safety Strategy (ESCA).

Through the ESCA, the SICA has worked continuously in collaboration with the international community to implement actions designed to increase safety by means of different components or strategic lines. The ICRIME Project is part of the proposed activities to work on the crime-fighting component.

The organisational structure of the project is complex. It is divided into 4 results, and the EU does not only assign project execution to different agents, as it does so according to different modes of execution. On the one hand, the first component with results 1 and 2 is assigned to the consortium set up between the FIIAPP and the French Agency for Cooperation, following a model of direct execution, while the second component, which is composed of results 3 and 4, is governed by a delegation agreement to be implemented by the AECID.

The General Secretary of the SICA will be responsible for ensuring the consistency of the whole intervention, by coordinating the actions involved in the 4 results.

The first result, which is led by the Ministry of Justice, exclusively covers the development of the Legal Medicine Institutes and Criminal Investigation Laboratories in 7 countries (Belize, Costa Rica, Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Panama and the Dominican Republic). This project works with 10 institutions which have different management models and are highly heterogeneous in their installations, organisation, equipment, services portfolio or the levels of training of their personnel.

Although the subject matter covered by this result is very broad, it may be grouped under 2 major objectives: organisational development and inter-institutional coordination.

Support which aims to strengthen the target organisations is fundamentally based on developing their quality systems, and it is planned to gain ISO accreditation for their different services. Work in other areas for improvement is also planned, including centre management, the review and validation of analytical methods and even the implementation of new techniques. To support these activities, a budget is allocated for the acquisition of equipment.

With the aim of executing the planned actions through an exchange of experiences with the public administrations, different activities are designed in which experts from the Spanish forensic institutions under the Ministries of Justice and the Interior take part over the short-term. These multidisciplinary actions mean that project actions benefit not only the target organisations, but also the experts themselves, who gain valuable experience from this conjoint working.

In connection with inter-institutional coordination, the aim is to consolidate the relationship between centres, facilitating the use of forensic tests in the persecution of transnational crime. The Central American Network of Forensic Services was created for this purpose in the SICA countries, as a new form of regional coordination.

Although forensic institutions rarely benefit from cooperation projects, in recent years the Ministry of Justice has tried to encourage participation in proposals of this type. The intervention of these professionals in such a varied and complex range of fields, such as improving citizen safety or investigating and judicially processing crime, caring for victims, intervening in gender-based violence, participating in major catastrophes with multiple victims, the problems deriving from migratory movements or the identification of disappeared individuals, underlines the importance of forensic science within the context of international cooperation.