



A DECADE OF ALLIANCE FOR PUBLIC HEALTH IN SOUTH-EASTERN EUROPE

28TH MEETING OF THE SOUTH-EASTERN EUROPE HEALTH NETWORK

Brussels, 13-14 March 2012

DECISION

ON

**SOUTH-EASTERN EUROPE HEALTH NETWORK'S
GUIDANCE FOR COMMUNICATIONS AND VISIBILITY STRATEGY**

“South East European Health Network’s Guidance for Communications And Visibility Strategy”

29th Meeting of the SEE Health Network, Zagreb, Croatia, 05-06 June 2012

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Recalling the principles of work of the SEE HN stipulated in the Memorandum of Understanding, and especially of regional ownership, partnership, transparency and accountability, complementarity, sustainability, equal and active involvement of all SEE member states, distribution of activities and resources based on a country needs assessment, decentralization of activities and resources and efficiency, and

Having regards the need to provide for tool to properly manage communication and visibility of the SEE HN activities, and thus, to provide for realization of the SEE HN principles of work, the SEE Health Network at its 29th regular meeting held in Zagreb, 05-06 June, 2012 has endorsed the following:

DECISION

To accept the “**South East European Health Network Guidance for Communications And Visibility Strategy**” as provided in Annex A to this decision;

To request the Secretariat to elaborate a **South East European Health Network for Communications And Visibility Strategy** in line with this *Guidance*, and to deliver the Strategy, accompanied by an analysis of financial implications, for approval by the SEEHN at its 30th Meeting in November, 2012;

To request the Secretariat to include in this Strategy a proposal for a formal set of procedures, including the role, tasks and responsibilities of the involved individuals, to allow the SEEHN to make timely and effective responses to urgent inquiries. These procedures should include a contingency plan for managing rapidly-escalating communications needs, such as when individual queries gather momentum and risk causing serious reputational damage; and

To request the Secretariat report back to the SEEHN with regard to planned evaluation metrics for assessing the effectiveness of the SEEHN communications.

The “**Guidance on South East European Health Network for Communications and Visibility Strategy**” should guide the communications and visibility work of the Secretariat, the Executive Committee and the RHDCs while the **South East European Health Network for Communications**

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And Visibility Strategy is in development.

This Decision enters into force on the 06th of June, 2012.

ANNEX A

South East European Health Network Guidance for Communications and Visibility Strategy

Preamble

This document was produced to address the SEEHN principles of work on communications and visibility.

The SEEHN should complete and implement a communications and visibility strategy that emphasizes transparency, rapid and thoughtful responses, and relevance to partners, and which includes guidelines about who can speak on behalf of the SEEHN, how to represent the organization appropriately and how to increase visibility of activities both on political and technical level.

Communication is a key issue in SEEHN activities and has been subject to discussions during several SEEHN Plenary Sessions. As the recognition of the SEEHN and the profile of its work have grown over time, so, too, have the requirements placed on it to communicate effectively, particularly with the media.

At the time of drafting this document, the SEEHN is in the process of establishing the Secretariat to be followed by recruiting Senior Communications Manager who will report directly to the Secretary of the Secretariat. This document provides guidance to the Secretariat, who is expected to develop and deliver a comprehensive communications and visibility strategy that reflects the expectations of the SEEHN in respect of outreach and media communications.

The SEEHN Plenary is ultimately responsible for ensuring that SEEHN communications are appropriate and that the Strategy meets the requirements of the SEEHN and is being delivered suitably, although between SEEHN Plenary sessions, the Executive Committee will act on the SEEHN behalf. The SEEHN leadership will rely on the Senior Communications Manager, who reports to the Secretary, for expert advice as necessary and the coordination and coherence of SEEHN communication. Decisions regarding fundamental communications issues, according to their importance, should be debated and approved within the framework of the Executive

Committee and/or the SEEHN Plenary.

1. Principles

Communications are an important aspect of the work of the SEEHN, essential to its vision and mission to coordinate and maintain regional cooperation in public health in order to further the reforms of the health systems in the SEE member countries, and thus contribute to economic and social development in the twenty-first century. At the same time the SEEHN has a mandate to further build its institutional and organizational capacities on the existing institutional, human and knowledge resources in the SEE region, gradually transforming the SEE Health Network into a viable, self-reliant mechanism, capable of serving the goal endorsed by the SEE ministers of health in the Dubrovnik Pledge of 2001, in the Skopje Pledge of 2005 and in the Banja Luka Pledge of 2011.

The following set of principles should guide the SEEHN approach focused to communications and visibility:

- **Objective and transparent.** The SEEHN’s communications approach and activities should, at all times, be consistent with the SEEHN overarching principles stipulated in the MoU (2008 and beyond).
- **Policy-relevant but not policy-prescriptive.** It is an essential quality of the SEEHN work that it is policy-relevant but not policy-prescriptive. The presentation of its documents and reports should remain policy-neutral and maintain evidence balance. The SEEHN communications approach and activities should be consistent with these qualities.
- **Drawn from SEEHN documents and reports.** While the SEEHN work and process of preparing documents and reports aim to reflect a range of views and expertise, its communications should reflect the language that has been subject to the SEEHN review process and has been accepted, adopted or approved by the SEEHN members states and partners.
- **Recognizing SEEHN as a unique organization.** SEEHN unique process of cooperation

assessed by the SEEHN member states and partners is central to the authority and quality of SEEHN reports. The SEEHN should always seek to be clear in its communications about what the organization is and what it does – *cooperating for improving the health of the people in the SEE region, providing and sustaining the ownership and leadership of the countries in the region in implementing concerted action in the priority areas for health defined by the ministers of health of the SEE member countries*. The objective is to ensure that the SEEHN provides a context to guide the interpretation of its action and documents and to ensure that the public has unbiased information about the SEEHN.

- **Timely and audience-appropriate.** In order to be effective, the SEEHN communications approach and activities should be aimed at ensuring that timely and appropriate information enters the public domain – both proactively to communicate action and documents, and reactively in response to questions or criticism.

2. Defining the scope of SEEHN communications (political and technical)

The scope of the SEEHN work is wide, embracing both political level action and technical one. Both levels are diverse and multi-disciplinary, spanning physical science, impacts, adaptation, and mitigation. The overall picture of SEEHN communication should fully represent this range of action.

The SEEHN primary communication outputs are its actions and documents, political action and documents, technical papers, and methodology action and documents, which authors should strive to make as comprehensible as possible and with high level of accuracy.

The scope of wider communications activities is to support good understanding of these action and documents, and the processes that generated them, among SEEHN primary audience of governments and policy- makers. Specifically, the communications activities of the SEEHN should include:

- Raising awareness of new action and documents, and the major conclusions thereof, among SEEHN primary audiences.

- Ensuring that the content of SEEHN action and documents is readily available to interested parties – including those who will use these action and documents as a basis for their own communications with wider audiences.
- Clearly communicating how SEEHN functions, how SEEHN is governed, and how SEEHN action and documents are produced. RHDCs are encouraged to continue their ongoing efforts to explore engagement with wider audiences as they develop their action and documents. These efforts are an important way of communicating the work of the SEEHN and increasing transparency.
- Proactively providing information and responding to media queries – including at short notice – about SEEHN activities and processes, and the content of published SEEHN action and documents.
- Responding effectively to incorrect representations of the SEEHN and its processes, where these could be damaging to the SEEHN reputation.

SEE HN engagement at sub-regional level in the SEE

To ensure that information produced by the SEEHN is widely distributed, the SEEHN Secretariat should engage Executive Committee members and National Health Coordinators (NHCs) and – while recognizing budgetary restrictions – consider capacity-building relating to the role of NHCs in communications and outreach activities.

Executive Committee members and NHCs should be sent all relevant information and reference materials around the release of action and documents. Equally, when the SEEHN Secretariat issues a statement, press release or other materials intended for a wide audience, this should be shared with Executive Committee members and NHCs so that they are informed of the SEEHN central conclusions and messaging for public statements.

By engaging Executive Committee members and NHCs, important relationships will be built, which deepen reciprocal understanding and ultimately help the SEEHN achieve its wider communication objectives.

The SEEHN plenary should consider whether there should be enhanced media access to its meetings. To facilitate this consideration the Director of the Secretariat should consult with other partner organizations and countries, and the Secretariat should bring forward a proposal at the

appropriate time.

Web presence

The SEEHN website should serve its target audiences as well as NHCs. It should effectively communicate the organization’s nature and mandate. For the purposes of outreach efforts, it is important that a strong web presence be maintained.

Special attention should be dedicated to up-to-date information and action and documents, a well designed search function, content in English- as the official SEEHN language, user-friendly navigation and accessibility features.

Up-to-date leaflets and Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) from SEEHN work and special action and documents should be prominent. In addition, consideration should be given to archiving on website communication products dating back to the beginning of the SEEHN.

The Senior Communications Manager of the Secretariat should work to ensure consistency across all the official websites of the SEEHN, including those of its RHDCs.

The Secretariat should recommend to the Executive Committee the use of appropriate technologies to implement the agreed communications strategy.

3. Target audiences

The primary target audiences of the communications efforts of the SEEHN are the member states and partners. Engaging and building relationships with the media is an important way in which the SEEHN can communicate the information contained in its action and documents, as well as its processes and procedures.

Broader audiences, such as, SEEHN observer organizations, public health community in Europe, the scientific public health community, the education and other governmental sectors, Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs), and the wider public, also have an interest in the work and activities and documents of the SEEHN. While these are not primary audiences of the SEEHN communications efforts, the SEEHN should look for ways to ensure that information is available and accessible for

these audiences. While the SEEHN itself does not produce derivative products aimed at specific audiences, it may engage with organizations that take elements of SEEHN activities and documents and communicate them in more audience-specific formats. However, such products must not be considered joint productions or in any way products of the SEEHN.

4. Language of communication

Consistent with its basic documents, official language of the SEEHN is English. SEEHN communication practices should follow this model, and SEEHN communications products, including brochures and press releases, should be translated and made available. The standards for quality control of all translations need to be enhanced and maintained at high levels.

A number of countries have undertaken translation of SEEHN action and documents into their respective languages. The SEEHN will continue to welcome these initiatives and provide SEEHN documents as appropriate, while noting that the translations have been prepared under the responsibility of the respective country or institutions. The Secretariat can support NHCs efforts to translate SEEHN documents into their respective languages by providing guidance on good practice for their translation. Countries that undertake to translate action and documents into non-SEEHN official language could be assisted by SEEHN to translate the key graphics (diagrams, etc.) into their languages, thus guaranteeing the accessibility of SEEHN products.

5. Guidelines

How authorized spokespersons should represent the SEEHN

The ability of SEEHN spokespersons to provide neutral and objective statements that are grounded in the action and documents and other products adopted by the SEEHN will be essential to preserving the trust and confidence placed in the SEEHN by decision-makers and other key audiences. Authorized spokespersons should act in accordance with the guiding principles that have been set out for SEEHN communications, most notably maintaining policy neutrality, evidence balance, and refraining from, or being perceived as advocating or communicating personal views while speaking in their official SEEHN capacity.

Selecting authorized spokespersons for the SEEHN as a whole, and for individual action and documents

The objective of these guidelines is to identify a group of authorized spokespersons allowing the SEEHN to speak credibly to its products and processes. The primary spokespersons have a mandate from and accountability to the SEEHN by virtue of the election process.

- The President of the SEEHN and the SEEHN NHCs, or their appropriate designate, are the lead spokespersons for the organization as a whole. This applies to topics including but not limited to SEEHN operations, proceedings of SEEHN, SEEHN Sessions and Executive Committee Sessions, Synthesis Action and documents, principles governing SEEHN work, SEEHN rules of procedures, etc.
- Directors are the lead spokespersons for the activities and content of their respective RHDCs. The Directors may also engage spokespersons from among the respective RHDC, the authors and contributors to the action and documents with the best knowledge of the subject matter and the best media/presentation skills. Other factors could include meeting language requirements, adequate regional representation and timing/availability.
- In the case of media contacting a Coordinating Lead Author (CLA) or Lead Author (LA) to make inquiries concerning SEEHN matters, the CLA or LA should clarify that he or she is not representing SEEHN but answering as a research scientist involved in writing of the SEEHN assessment report/document.
- Effective communications can only be assured if there is centralized coordination of the message. Consistent with the common practice of other organizations, the Senior Communications Manager should be the initial point of contact for the media, and to provide on request background and technical information based on approved action and documents and materials. The Senior Communications Manager should ensure the relevant and appropriate coordination of messages within the leadership and spokespersons of the SEEHN, and keep the Executive Committee, the Secretariat and NHCs informed of communications activities.

Rapid response

The SEEHN sometimes needs to respond rapidly to media enquiries or breaking stories. This is

important in order to maintain the reputation and credibility of the SEEHN. This guidance is principles-based and does not provide an exhaustive list of situations justifying pro-active engagement with the media. These responses will often require inputs of both technical/scientific and communications expertise and the organization needs to find a balance between the need to ensure approved language and the need to respond to the media cycle.

As an urgent and immediate priority, the Senior Communications Manager should make proposals to the Executive Committee for a set of procedures, including the role, tasks and responsibilities of the involved individuals, to allow the SEEHN to make timely and effective responses to urgent inquiries. The Executive Committee should inform the SEEHN Plenary about these procedures, as well as future revisions. These procedures would allow a response to be developed using appropriate subject knowledge (including the expertise of the most relevant RHDC), but incorporate redundancy to prevent individual absences from stalling a response. A critical analysis of the media occurrences involving the SEEHN over the last two years would be helpful in developing these procedures.

It is the responsibility of the Executive Committee to ensure such circumstances are handled appropriately and in a way that protects the reputation of the SEEHN. If the enquiry concerns a RHDC product, the Director of the RHDC must be involved. Before and after the response, the Senior Communications Manager should maintain open channels of communication with the Executive Committee and provide updates as appropriate.

The procedures must ensure that real-time demands of the media are taken into consideration while remaining robust enough to guarantee accuracy and consistency with SEEHN action and documents.

Errors

The SEEHN is in the process of developing a formal procedure for acknowledging potential errors of fact that might change the content of its work and documents. In the case of addressing such a potential error of fact, the Executive Committee, which has the responsibility of overseeing the process of handling errors, as identified by the SEEHN Protocol For Addressing Possible Errors In Seehn Political Action And Documents, Technical Action And Documents Or Methodology Action And Documents, should work closely with the Senior Communications Manager on a timely and cogent response. If an error is identified, it should be addressed in a forthright manner, corrected, and

formally acknowledged.

Though a full response is likely to take more time than allowed by the media cycle, it is however important to quickly communicate to the Media, as well as NHCs, that the issue is being examined according to the forthcoming Protocol For Addressing Possible Errors In Seehn Political Action And Documents, Technical Action And Documents Or Methodology Action And Documents.

Planned communications materials

An overall strategy for planned communications materials (i.e., those associated with a planned report release) should be prepared by the Secretariat and approved by the Chair of the Executive Committee well in advance of the planned release date. Specific products (i.e. press releases, media lines, key messages and slides for presentations prepared by the RHDCs will be approved by the Director of the RHDC.

Spokespersons will play a key role in the communication of SEEHN action and documents. For the release of each report, the Senior Communications Manager will engage with the RHDCs, as appropriate, to identify content-specific spokespersons to work on outreach. For the release of a report, the Executive Committee and identified spokespersons should be kept well informed about the planned communications materials.

Press-releases prepared for SEEHN communications should be disseminated to all relevant people, including the NHCs, the SEEHN Executive Committee, the Secretariat and the RHDCs.

Media and presentation training

The Secretariat in conjunction with the Executive Committee and the RHDCs, as appropriate, should strongly consider media and presentation training to enhance the ability and effectiveness of spokespersons in communicating the messages of the SEEHN to the media and presenting the activities and documents of the SEEHN as part of general outreach activities.

6. Limits of SEEHN Communication

It is an essential quality of the SEEHN that its action and documents are policy-relevant but not policy-prescriptive. When speaking on behalf of the SEEHN, individuals should take care to stay within this mandate – and not to express views beyond the scope of the SEEHN action and documents, or to advocate specific policies. SEEHN communications should be drawn from SEEHN action and documents.

All those associated with the SEEHN should be clear to distinguish in which instances they are speaking in an official SEEHN capacity and in which instances they are speaking personally or on behalf of other organizations. Similarly, those associated with the SEEHN should use their appropriate professional affiliation in activities unrelated to the SEEHN. For example, an individual should not be listed by an SEEHN title in a non-SEEHN report, as this might inadvertently link the report to the SEEHN or be misinterpreted as an SEEHN endorsement. Honors accorded to the SEEHN should be attributed to the organization and not to any individual.

The SEEHN recognizes that a large number of individuals participate in SEEHN activities without compensation from the SEEHN. These guidelines are not intended to restrict these volunteers from referring to their past or present SEEHN roles, nor to their own professional activities. However, it is vital to retain clear boundaries around those activities and conclusions that were subject to SEEHN process of review and adoption, recognizing that this distinction is not always clear to the public.

Those holding the most senior positions within the SEEHN are most readily associated with it and should be aware that the public and the media often do not differentiate among the various functions a person might have. It is expected that persons working at the highest levels take the most care in avoiding confusion or misinterpretation in their public statements. The senior leadership should be mindful that publicly advocating or expressing personal opinions about policies may jeopardize the reputation of the SEEHN, even if unintended. It is important that the SEEHN leadership is not perceived as taking positions or making statements that would have the appearance of reflecting bias in the work of the SEEHN.

While recognizing that the evidence content of action and documents remains private until they are released, contributors to SEEHN action and documents are encouraged to respond to interest in emerging action and documents, as an opportunity to communicate how the SEEHN works and to emphasize the need for careful assessments of emerging evidence. The SEEHN encourages the public

health community, including those involved in producing its action and documents, to engage with wide audiences on an ongoing basis. When doing so, those involved with the SEEHN should be mindful to make clear the distinction between their roles inside and outside the SEEHN.

The SEEHN Executive Committee will keep the implementation of these aspects of the strategy under review in respect of the activities of SEEHN Executive Committee Members.

7. Implementing the new strategy

Executing external communications effectively will require coordination of an extensive network within the SEEHN, including NHCs. Successful internal coordination is central to the success of external communication, and should be considered a priority by SEEHN leaders.

There are significant resource implications in communicating SEEHN work effectively, and the SEEHN will require regular updates on the financial implications of implementing the strategy.

SEEHN communication load varies greatly – depending both on the cycle of its action and documents, and the level of external interest in the SEEHN. The Secretariat will need to have the flexibility to respond to this changing cycle of activity, including by engaging additional temporary staff, including consultants, when necessary. All contractors, temporary staff and occasional contributors to the external communications of the SEEHN must have a clearly defined and centrally coordinated mandate – in line with the communications strategy to be developed by the Secretariat – and respect that the external communications activities of the SEEHN are under the authority and coordination of the Senior Communications Manager. In addition, the outreach and communications activities of the RHDCs should be carried out in cooperation with the Senior Communications Manager.

8. Evaluation of SEEHN Communications

The objectives set out in the Communications Strategy to be drafted by the Secretariat before the 30th Meeting of the SEEHN should be used as a guide to evaluating the SEEHN communications.

The Secretariat should facilitate appropriate evaluation of the SEEHN communications and report to Plenary Sessions of the SEEHN, including the type and extent of outreach and media coverage.

Evaluation action and documents should also be made available to the Executive Committee at regular intervals. These action and documents should be informed by feedback from the NHCs where possible.

Specific metrics for evaluation might be used so that the SEEHN is clear about the overall effectiveness and impact of communication efforts.