



SOUTH-EASTERN EUROPE
HEALTH NETWORK



REPORT

ON THE ACTIVITIES OF THE SEE HEALTH NETWORK SECRETARIAT

FOR THE PERIOD January – December 2020

SKOPJE, FEBRUARY, 2021

Approved by the SEEHN Executive Committee on its Third meeting held online via Zoom on 15 March 2021

SEE HEALTH NETWORK MEMBER STATES



ABBREVIATIONS

ALB	Republic of Albania
APYN	International Youth Health Organization
AMR	Antimicrobial resistance
BiH	Bosnia and Herzegovina
BUL	Republic of Bulgaria
CEI	Central European Initiative
CDC	Center of Disease Control Prevention
EC	European Commission
EEIRH	East European Institute for Reproductive Health
EHFG	European Health Forum Gastein
EU	European Union
Ex COM	Executive Committee
ITU	International Telecommunication Union
MKD	Republic of North Macedonia
MNE	Montenegro
MOH	Ministry of Health
MoHLSP	Ministry of Health, Labour, and Social Protection
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
NFPs	National Focal Points
NHCs	National Health Coordinators
RCC	Regional Cooperation Council
RHDCs	Regional Health Development Centers
MDA	Republic of Moldova
ROM	Romania
RS	Republika Srpska
SCS	Sub-Regional Cooperation Strategy
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
SECID	Southeast European Centre for the Surveillance and Control of Infectious Disease
SEE	South Eastern Europe
SEEHN	South Eastern European Health Network
SEENWH	SEE Network on Workers Health, Institute of Occupational Health of the MKD
SRB	Republic of Serbia
SRH	Sexual Reproductive Health
TCs	Teleconferences
ToT	Training-of-Trainers
WB	Western Balkans ¹
WHO	World Health Organization
WHO EURO	WHO Regional Office for Europe

¹ ALB, BiH, MNE, MKD, SRB common with SEEHN MSs



Report on the Activities of the SEEHN Secretariat for the period January- December 2020



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Report on the Activities of the SEEHN Secretariat for the period January- December 2020



Introduction

The present Report on the activities of the South Eastern European Health Network (SEEHN) Secretariat, has been developed for the period of January - December 2020 and is submitted to the attention of the Executive Committee according to the Annex 1: Roles and responsibilities of the SEE Health Network Secretariat of the *Memorandum of Understanding: Future of the South-eastern Europe Health Network in the framework of the South East European Co-operation Process*.

1. The SEEHN Secretariat structure

During the reporting period January - December 2020 the SEEHN Secretariat technical and administrative staff has been fulfilling its roles and responsibilities, including changes as following:

- SEEHN Secretariat Head – Overall responsibility for the management of the Secretariat and the support to the work of the Network (Contract since March 2017);
- Finance Officer (Contract since September 2016 as Administrative Officer and later with contract as Finance Officer since September 2018).
- Technical Officer, recruited staff of the SEEHN Secretariat, since January 2017.
- Administrative Assistant, part-time recruited staff of the SEEHN Secretariat, since July 2018 –until June 2020. This full time position is to be advertised in 2021, per need according to the COVID situation changes.
- Legal officer /office. This position to be advertised in 2021.
- Communication officers (since September/October 2020), three part-time consultants were contracted for three months to perform different communication tasks: first from Romania, to plan and develop communication messages during Romanian Presidency, second from Bosnia and Herzegovina to work in development of communication strategy and communication action plan for 2021 and third from Bulgaria to work with engaged experts on elaboration for Publication “20 years SEEHN”.
- IT Specialist, part-time staff member of the Secretariat: responsible for all IT issues including the postings to the Facebook, Instagram and Website of the SEEHN.

During the last reported year, Dr. Mira Jovanovski Dasic was successfully holding the leading position of the SEEHN Secretariat Director, continuously strengthening the internal capacities of the organization, securing with the Member States authorities the commitment for further cooperation within the framework of the SEEHN, as the key initiative for addressing health issues in the region.

2. SEEHN Executive Committee

The Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) of 29 April 2009 of the SEE Health Network, and its Addendum of 2011, the SEEHN High Level Representatives in line with Article VI – Governance and leadership: Presidency, Executive Committee and regional meetings named the National Health Coordinators (NHCs).

The elected Executive Committee during the closed Ex COM session, at the 42nd Plenary Meeting, held online, via zoom platform, on 21 July 2020, the following members of the SEEHN Executive Committee:

Chair: Dr. Danijela Urosevic, National Health Coordinator from Serbia, Assistant Minister, Sector of International Cooperation and European Integration, Ministry of Health of the Republic of Serbia;

Members of the SEE Health Network Member States Executive Committee:

- Dr Angel Kuncsev, SEEHN NHC BUL, Ministry of Health (MOH);
- Dr Vladimir Milosev, SEEHN NHC MKD, MOH²;
- Dr Alexandru Holostenco, SEEHN NHC MDA³, Ministry of Health, Labour, and Social Protection (MoHLSP).

All members of the Executive Committee with the Chair were appointed to serve a mandate of 2 years in the period July 2020 – June 2022.

Representatives of the International Organizations (Observers):

- Mr. Robb Butler, Executive Director, WHO Regional Office for Europe;
- Ms. Tanja Miscevic, Deputy Secretary, Regional Cooperation Council⁴.

Co-opted members practice was not extended further.

The Executive Committee held three meetings during 2020, through teleconference (TC) via Zoom. First meeting was held in May 2020 in the former competence of the ExCom. The new elected Ex Com held its first introductory TC meeting in September 2020. The Ex Com had its TC meeting in November 2020, prior 43rd Plenary Meeting.

² Subject to changes due to political changes in the Government of the MKD.

³ Subject to changes due to political changes in the Government of the MDA.

⁴Mr. Ilir Deda as a focal point from RCC to SEEHN.

3. Financial status and yearly contributions from the SEEHN Member States

The SEEHN Contributions Report in the Table below shows the status of contributions collected.

SEEHN CONTRIBUTIONS REPORT as of December 31, 2020.

SEEHN CONTRIBUTIONS REPORT

YEAR	Republic of Moldova	Bosnia and Herzegovina	Montenegro	Republic of Serbia	Republic of Bulgaria	Romania	The State of Israel	Republic of Albania	Republic of North Macedonia
2019	10,000 €	20,000 €	10,000 €	30,000 €	36,000 €	36,000 €	36,000 €	20,000 €	not paid
2020	10,000 €	20,000 €	10,000 €	30,000 €	36,000 €	36,000 €	36,000 €	not paid	not paid
2021*	10,000 €								
CONTRIBUTIONS DUE FOR 2019	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	20,000 €
CONTRIBUTIONS DUE FOR 2020	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	20,000 €	20,000 €
TOTAL INCOME IN 2020	10,000 €	20,000 €	10,000 €	30,000 €	36,000 €	36,000 €	36,000 €	20,000 €	

TOTAL CONTRIBUTIONS TO BE PAID FOR 2019	20,000 €
TOTAL CONTRIBUTIONS TO BE PAID FOR 2020	40,000 €
TOTAL ACTUAL INCOME FROM CONTRIBUTIONS IN 2020	198,000 €

*Republic of Moldova paid its contribution for 2021 in advance.

During the 2nd session of the Ex Com held online on 24 November 2020 via Zoom, the SEEHN Financial Report 2020 (as of November 20, 2020) and the SEEHN Financial Plan 2021, have been presented by Dr. Mira Jovanovski-Dasic, Head of SEEHN Secretariat and approved by the Ex Com members. Also, SEEHN projected Financial Report 2020 (with actual expenses as of November 20, 2020) and SEEHN Financial Plan 2021 have been presented during the Closed session of the 43rd SEEHN Plenary meeting and approved by SEEHN NHCs.

Total actual expenses by December 31, 2020 were 191,786 EUR. (Annex 1)

The Financial Plan for calendar year 2021 is with a ceiling of 407,516 EUR. (Annex 2)

Quarterly progress reports have been shared with all the NHCs and the final annual financial report for 2020 will be enclosed with this report. Also, the final Financial Plan for 2021, will be enclosed with this report.

4. SEEHN Communication activities

In the current period of mainly online operations, it is important that the visibility and presentation of the SEEHN is supported by a Communication Officers whose engagement is within the SEEHN plan.

SEEHN Secretariat through a short consultancy engagement has commissioned a Communication strategic plan developed for 2021. The document outlines overall goal, objectives and main activities along with communication platforms and approaches. (The draft document is presented in Annex 3: The South Eastern Europe Health Network Communication plan for 2021).

Another short term consultancy aimed at strengthening the collaboration and facilitate the exchanges between SEEHN Secretariat and the Presidency roles and responsibilities. It provided support to brand and customize the main messages on behalf of the SEEHN Romanian Presidency, during the second semester of 2020. Furthermore, support was provided at the main international events where SEEHN was represented by the Romanian Presidency Dr A. Baciu, Secretary of State, Ministry of Health of Romania.

On the occasion of the 20 years' anniversary of the SEEHN, to commemorate the creation and the achievements of the unique health development, occurring in the south-east corner of Europe; the Secretariat has launched the process to produce a publication in collaboration of the member states and the partnering organizations and countries. The vision is that the vivid album format publication would pay tribute to the founding people, the 9 member states, organizations, partners and activities – all that have contributed to this exceptional network. Two experts were contracted to work on elaboration on this publication to be promoted during 2021 on the occasion of celebration/marketing 20 years of the SEEHN.

Throughout the year, the IT maintenance expert for the Network who is a part time SEEHN Secretariat staff, has been continuously supporting the IT needs of the Secretariat and has been maintaining the SEEHN Web site, Facebook page and Instagram page.

5. SEEHN Activities at Political Level

The SEEHN Secretariat in collaboration with the **SEEHN Presidency of the Montenegro (MNE) and Romania (ROM)** coordinated, developed and carried out all the technical and logistical preparations for the **42nd and 43rd Plenary Meetings, that were dedicated to the COVID-19 disruption, and were organized on zoom platform.**

The SEEHN Secretariat carried out also the following communication strategies in order to manage the limited financial resources and secure timeliness of the implementation of the planned activities at regional level:

- *Negotiation on exchanging with the Presidency and Ex Com by correspondence/online*
- *Submitting to the NHCs for consultation and collecting approvals by correspondence*
- *Setting up Calendar of events for the Presidency/collecting data by correspondence*

As of 1st January to 31st December 2021, SEEHN Presidency is taken over by Republic of Serbia (SRB).

5.1. SEEHN Secretariat

Dr. Mira Jovanovski Dasic has been successfully fulfilling her leadership mandate of the Director of the SEEHN Secretariat during the reporting period. She was continuously sustaining the highest diplomatic correspondence with the Ministries of Health of the SEEHN Member States, as well as with the Ambassadors of the SEEHN Member States Presidencies and a range of stakeholders of strategic importance for the SEE Network partnerships.

During 2020, 2 countries have had their Presidency mandates within the SEEHN. The first part of the year the Presidency Mandate was held by MNE (1 July 2019 until end of June 2020), followed by the Romanian Presidency for the following six months (July - December 2020).

Dr. Dasic had on several occasions bilateral meetings with the national health coordinators from both member states, in order to facilitate the implementation and coordination of the presidency mandates.

Dr Dasic had a fruitful meeting with **H.E. Ms. Marija Petrovic, Montenegrin Ambassador** to North Macedonia, on 15.01.2020, related to the organization of the Montenegro Coffee Morning, under the auspices of the Montenegrin Presidency of SEEHN. Consequently, the Embassy of Montenegro together with the Secretariat of SEE Health Network and the “Dobredojde” Macedonia Welcome Centre, organized an event dedicated to Montenegro and the **“Importance of regional cooperation in public health to advocate with single voice that clean air is a human right, not a privilege!”**, on February 6, 2020, in Skopje, the Republic of North Macedonia.

SEEHN contributed to the latest Diplomatski letopis. SEEHN Director Dr Mira Dasic met Mr Dragan Janjatov Editor-in-Chief and Mr Dimitar Belcev Deputy Editor-in-Chief from the journal Diplomatski Letopis, on 4.02.2020, in Skopje, MKD. SEE Health Network activities have been presented and discussed. Diplomatski Letopis in its latest edition presents the Regional initiatives hosted by the Republic of North Macedonia.

A great meeting took place in the SEEHN Secretariat with **H.E. Dr. Georg Woutsas, Austrian Ambassador** in MKD, on 10.02.2020. The discussion included current and future plans of SEEHN, comprising the readiness to continue working on health issues and strategic partnerships in the SEE Region (Western Balkans and beyond). Specific attention has been put also on the air pollution in the Region and the eventual modalities on how to contribute to the government's efforts to decrease the threat to the population health. Finally, interlocutors exchanged opinions regarding the existing possibilities on how to better address public health challenges nationally and regionally.

Dr. Dasic met with **H.E. Mr Dragan Jacimovic, Ambassador of Bosnia and Herzegovina** to the Republic of North Macedonia, on 11.02.2020. It was also highlighted that the SEE Health Network is continuously committed to Regional cooperation, especially the RHDC on Mental Health based in Sarajevo, BiH. In a friendly atmosphere information on the current areas of interest regarding the strengthening of the technical possibilities of the Network have also been exchanged.

Dr Dasic met **Dr Hans Kluge, WHO Regional Director for Europe**, on 27 February 2020 in Skopje in the premises of WHO CO. The meeting was good opportunity to present and discuss the ongoing and planned activities/initiatives of mutual interest.

Dr. Dasic, participated at the online **Meeting of the Ministers of Health within the Berlin Process**, on 22 October 2020 co-chaired by North Macedonian Minister of Health, Dr. Venko Filipche and the Bulgarian Health Minister Dr. Kostadin Angelov. For the first time this year, the Health sector has been included on the agenda. The discussions focused on the COVID-19 health response in the region and beyond. It comprised dialogues on coordinated approach to free movement of people, goods and services while keeping the epidemic situation under control. In particular, this meeting was of outmost importance to discuss the next package of measures to contain the outbreak and to support Western Balkan populations and beyond. It was also emphasized that at this critical time the support of international donors is of highest importance. During her intervention, Dr. Dasic mentioned some of the SEEHN specific activities linked to the outbreak. Among them are:

- Building critical skills and knowledge necessary for health workers to respond rapidly and efficiently to COVID-19;
- Assessment of the stress and burn out among the healthcare workers during the COVID-19 pandemic;
- Increase of the knowledge on COVID-19 among Primary Health Care nurses;
- Establishing of the Thematic Network on Sexual and Reproductive Health to gather more data on the COVID-19 associated pregnancies and new-borns. One of the outcomes of this meeting is the establishment of a system of information exchange on the pandemic management experiences in the region. It is extremely important to

foster better coordination in Western Balkan countries and beyond to be able to cope effectively with the COVID-19 pandemic in the next period.

During 2020, negotiations were held to renew the bilateral partnership have been on going with European Health Forum Gastein (EHFG), project HOPE, and UNFPA. It is expected in early 2021 to finalize and formalize these processes.

All these bilateral and multilateral meetings emphasized the importance of the regional cooperation and agreed to expand the technical possibilities for the enhancement of the Network and also to support any other health initiatives that might be of interest at the regional level.

5.2. Sub-Regional Cooperation Strategy between SEEHN and WHO Regional Office for Europe for the period 2018-2023

The first **Sub-regional Cooperation Strategy (SCS) of the WHO Regional Office for Europe and SEEHN⁵** that has been signed by Dr Zsuzsanna Jakab on behalf of WHO/Europe and Dr Mira Dasic on behalf of SEEHN Secretariat within the framework of the Ministerial Meeting, held on 10 July 2018 in Tel-Aviv, State of Israel.

This policy strategic planning document that is a renewed commitment of the WHO EURO and South-eastern Europe Health Network (SEEHN) to improve and contribute to health, well-being and prosperity in South-eastern Europe within the framework of the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The activities are planned in a multi-country mode of cooperation to achieve progress at the Regional level and at the same time to advance the national priorities and common goals.

Since the signature the involved parties started the implementation of different actions to achieve the key target for universal health coverage in the Member States of SEEHN.

6. SEEHN Technical Activities in January - December 2020

During this first pandemic year, it came clear that no single country or organization can face these global and regional public health challenges alone. For this reason, establishing and strengthening partnerships was and will be another key component of SEEHN work ahead. Therefore, partners' collaboration and support and investment in and with SEEHN would prove to be a cost-effective vehicle for providing assistance in regional context. Co-generation of investment in the South

⁵ http://www.euro.who.int/_data/assets/pdf_file/0003/392772/seehn-scs-2018-2023-eng.pdf?ua=1

Eastern Region in terms of intelligence and funding is key to achieve longstanding results and sustainable health gains promoting a culture of health.

At the same time, SEEHN strived and facilitated recovery and shall continue rebuilding health systems in inclusive and sustainable ways and help prepare for the future risks and pandemics. The priority areas to attention shall be support and strengthen healthcare personnel capacities, address mental health, to advance the mHealth solutions and digital agenda, strengthen primary healthcare, promote immunisation, address health inequalities. Regionally, cross border exchange of information and prevention and control practices among health professionals on COVID -19 is still important to be improved. Additionally, cross-sectoral support shall be closer considered, including as under contingency plans.

6.1 Cooperation with WHO Regional Office for Europe

WHO Regional Office for Europe during the reporting period, provided continuous support to the SEEHN Secretariat, including technical advices and support at high level and technical meetings in various areas of public health:

- **Participation to WHO high level meetings:**
 - ✓ Dr. Kenan Hrapović, Minister of Health, Montenegrin SEEHN President delivered a Joint Statement at the **73rd World Health Assembly in Geneva, on 18 May, 2020**. The event was held online. The Statement focused on the COVID-19 pandemic and efforts taken to mitigate and control the damages. More than ever, the importance of partnership and solidarity was emphasized, and as those were the principles that are embedded in the SEE Health Network founding documents. The COVID-19 pandemic has hit hard on the middle-income countries revealing an essential value of health as an investment, not as an expenditure. Now, more than ever the investments in the health systems are crucial to be kept high on the political agenda and strive to the good health and well-being of our populations.
 - ✓ Dr Andrei Baci, Romanian Presidency NHC, represented SEEHN at the **70th WHO Regional Committee for Europe, held in Copenhagen, Denmark, online, 14-16 September 2020**. The first intervention briefed on the recent initiatives of the Network implemented with the WHO support and further enhanced under the Sub-Regional Cooperation Strategy, 2018-2023. Moreover, SEEHN welcomed the European Programme of Work, 2020–2025 – “United Action for Better Health in Europe” and alignment to the underlying principles of leaving no one behind and strengthened health leadership reflected on the new EWP proposal. The second statement focused on the role of SEEHN as a cost-effective vehicle for providing assistance in regional context and further pledged for investment in the South Eastern Europe Region in terms of intelligence and funding as key to achieve longstanding results and sustainable health gains and promoting a culture of health in the SEE region.

- ✓ **Dr. Dasic had several meetings with Dr Hans Kluge, WHO Regional Director**, during the reporting period. The meetings were held online. The discussions focused on the COVID-19 pandemic and efforts taken to mitigate and control the damages. More than ever, the importance of partnership and solidarity was emphasized, and as those were the principles that are embedded in the SEE Health Network founding documents. Another outlet of strategic importance is to build resilient health systems. Furthermore, health and economy shall be seen in unity and complementarity. The COVID-19 pandemic has disastrous effect on the middle-income countries revealing an essential value of health as an investment, not as an expenditure. Now, more than ever the investments in the health systems are crucial to be kept high on the political agenda and strive to the good health and well-being of our populations.
- **Technical advice and briefings** for the implementation process of the Chisinau Pledge, Action Plan were supported with the following objectives:
 - To deliver on the commitments of the SEEHN Member States to the Chisinau Pledge, building upon the legacy of the SEE Health Network developing, promoting and supporting regional cooperation and technical activities in public health in SEE for the past 18 years.
 - To deliver on the commitments of the SEEHN Member States and SEEHN Secretariat under the Sub-Regional Cooperation Strategy, involving the relevant expertise, mechanisms and structures.
 - **Communication for health promotion:** SEEHN was marking international days related to the health during the reporting period: 7 April 2020, World Health Day: Support Nurses and Midwives, European Immunization Week, celebrated across Europe during the week; Hand Hygiene Day, observed annually on May 5 to raise awareness of the importance of adequate handwashing in health care settings; 5 May 2020, International Day of the Midwife; 12 May 2020, International Nurses Day; European Week Against Cancer (25–31 May 2020) Shape Europe’s Beating Cancer Plan; No Tobacco Day – 31 May 2020; World Blood Donor Day during the pandemic – 14 June 2020, World Mental Health Day (10 October); World hypertension day (15 October); World Diabetes Day (14 November) and World Antibiotic Awareness Week (18-24 November) aimed to increase awareness of global antimicrobial resistance and decrease drug-resistant diseases.

6.2 Cooperation with the Regional Cooperation Council

RCC continues its efforts in implementing SEE 2020 related work programmes.

Establishing and enhancing the cooperation with the other regional initiatives in line with the implementation of the framework of SEE 2020. SEEHN contributed with insightful feedback to the SEE 2020 Strategy Annual Report on Implementation, during April 2020.

SEEHN Secretariat had with RCC Human Capital Development representative a teleconference (TC) on 6 April 2020, on the cooperation within the SEE2020 Strategy and addressed request that SEEHN Secretariat coordinates regional activities regarding the COVID-19 pandemic, any actions which might have been taken forward, and to assist the efforts to alleviate this pandemic impact in SEE Region. Another, follow-up TC has been held on 26.05.2020. The later one has been in cooperation and alignment with the RHDC SECID, Albania, on the priorities and proposed actions on mitigation of COVID-19 effects in the SEE Region. Consequently, an extensive list of Proposals for regional cooperation including technical and legal levels have been presented to the RCC for consideration.

RCC organized its **Annual Meeting** on 25 June 2020 via Webex platform, where Dr Dasic participated and contributed to the meeting.

The SEEHN Secretariat jointly with **RCC, WHO, the European mHealth Innovation and Knowledge Hub, EC, International Telecommunication Union (ITU) Office for Europe** and representatives of Western Balkan Economies had a common webinar. SEEHN Secretariat provided support to the RCC in its efforts to implement SEE 2020 related work programmes. The Regional Webinar "*European mHealth Hub Support – share experience with Western Balkan (WB) Economies on digital solutions developed by the Hub*" was held on 28th of September 2020. All the participants engaged in open discussions and exchanged views on the digitalization potential on the transformation of health care systems.

The SEE Governments had the opportunity to explore the benefits of mHealth deployment in the national health systems. The Webinar highlighted the experience and expertise of the mHealth Hub to build countries' capacity and provide practical assistance to plan, implement and scale national mHealth programs, according to the countries' needs.

All stakeholders committed to build on the momentum and take further steps aimed at scaling up evidence-based digital and mobile health solutions. There are common possibilities for future partnerships to be explored, and working collaboratively with the mHealth Hub will allow learning and sharing knowledge and will provide mechanisms to boost the uptake of eHealth solutions within the Western Balkans.

RCC, together with SEEHN, will continue to coordinate efforts and follow up on mHealth hub with WHO, ITU and with all other partners, and also will further support development of digital health programs in WB economies. As part of next steps, Western Balkan economies shall provide feedback on the following proposals:

- To conduct need assessment in each country, including but not limited to cross-border aspects in the area of eHealth and regional actions that needs to be undertaken in the regard of data protection and privacy.
- Follow up action may be followed in two main directions, engagement of opportunities with current mHealth tools and apps and in-depth assessment of the needs for additional instrument of support (technical or financial) for WB economies.
- Assessment of potential needs to be addressed shall include the country maturity level in digital health, strategic orientation of the programme, according to the economy goals and priorities for development.

It has been proposed to have commissioned letter with expressed interest of the economies for the mHealth hub with options of the each economy engagement and short to mid-long plan for implementation⁶.

6.3 Cooperation with the European Commission

Cooperation with European Commission (EC) continued in 2020. Due to COVID disruptions SEEHN was continuously negotiating with EC TAIEX Instrument representatives, by planning 3 multi-country workshops out of 9 multi-country events remaining from the initial 11 pre-approved package, to be conducted in the period end of 2020, spring 2021 (Annex 4 current status of the SEEHN-TAIEX multi-country events implementation).

As a result, Albania, Montenegro and Republic of Moldova are in pipeline for the organization of multi-country workshops:

- ✓ Intervention and **Policies on Antibiotics Use** in the SEEHN Member States (Western Balkans and beyond) (ALB)
- ✓ Coping with **Non-Communicable Diseases (NCDs) by Strengthening and Upgrading the Capacity of Nursing and Midwifery Workforce** in the SEEHN Member States (Western Balkans and beyond) (MDA)
- ✓ Workshop on **NCDS' population based registries** in the SEEHN Member States (MNE).

Due to COVID-19 pandemic the planned events organisation was not possible during 2020, until now, some of them are planned to be delivered online.

Republic of North Macedonia has engaged with 2 multi-country workshop. One of them on sexual and reproductive health has been revised and applied a second time. No response yet is received form the EC. Another one TAIEX Multi-Country Workshop on the Implementation of a single system 112 for coordinated and fast response of emergency

⁶ The webinar report is available per request at the SEEHN Secretariat and Western Balkan economies representatives that participated in the event.

medical services, fire services and police in case of an accident and emergency, was under discussions, and negotiations and the final application has been sent to MoH of MKD for further application procedures towards EC.

TAIEX Workshop on "Mental Health-Human Rights" applied by RHDC on Mental Health from Bosnia and Herzegovina, has been cancelled twice, because of various reasons. Because of the importance of the topic the prepared relevant application will be possibly used in the future.

The Secretariat is continuously updating the collected proposals by the RHDCs and is inviting MSs to send their proposals and ideas for further development.

At this stage, the SEE Region has another 3 events in the pipeline for implementation, 2 project opportunities for consideration to be applied, and 2 for political negotiation.

6.4 Other partners

The 2020 Pandemic disruption has brought solidarity and partnership as preferred *modus operandi*. The SEEHN Secretariat has always valued its **Partner organizations and countries** and 2020 was defined by continuously exchanged information and strengthened collaborations. Consequently, it is worth mentioning the importance and value of the discussions on the development of the new partnerships between public health experts and representatives of the NGOs, where SEEHN could play a role and have the flexibility to mediate for the best interest and benefit of all involved parties and common good.

In this regard, SEEHN Secretariat had a teleconference with the International Youth Health Organization (APYN) director, held on 9th November 2020. The discussions focused on the future opportunities for joint action. SEEHN places great attention on Youth component in its activities such as integrating youth particularities into public health policies. SEEHN joined as partner to the Erasmus+ application for the Youth Health Forum, which is planned for May 2021, in Portorož, Slovenia, a project financed by the EC ERASMUS + tool.

European Health Forum Gastein (EHFG)

European Health Forum Gastein (EHFG) supported the participation of representatives from all SEEHN Member States and the SEEHN Secretariat to the leading Forum "*EHFG 2020: Dancing with elephants: New partnerships for health, democracy, business*", held in the period 30.09 – 2.10.2020 online from Gastein, Austria.

The granted participation at the EHFG 2020 Edition, allowed SEEHN the opportunity to connect throughout European Region. The technical solutions EHFG implemented gathered entire Europe and beyond around challenging topics on health systems. EHFG 2020 Edition extensive knowledge, recent data and momentum for further actions.

The SEEHN was represented at the EHFG by Dr. Andrei Baci, Secretary of State from the Ministry of Health of Romania, on behalf of the Romanian Presidency to the SEEHN.

The plenary debate focused on tackling the COVID-19 Infodemic, a major challenge that all our Governments of the SEE Region experienced with the spread of the novel coronavirus. The avalanche of information about the virus spreading rapidly on social media platforms created confusion and mistrust and undermined an effective public health response. Disinformation erodes trust in institutions and harms democracies by hampering the ability of citizens to take informed decisions. The Secretary of State addressed questions on the impact of the infodemia in countries in South East Europe and on strategies to address vaccine hesitancy in the context of a new COVID-19 vaccine.

The South Eastern European Region is no exception to the invasion of an infodemia. The official shared national experiences from the SEE region to reflect the challenges the SEE Governments faced.

Many considerable advances in health have been made, however, there are a number of areas that seem to be at a stalemate despite ample evidence on how to move forward. Examples include the topic of health reforms in general; tackling AMR; addressing health inequalities; advancing primary healthcare and making universal health coverage a reality for all. The SEEHN also joined the booth initiative and the opened networking possibilities.

Moreover, Dr Dasic continued her mandate within Expert Advisory Committee of the EHFG, joined in February 2020.

Central European Initiative (CEI)

The SEEHN Secretariat responded to the CEI Extraordinary Call for Proposals 2020. The call for projects was aimed to finance initiatives on mitigation measures for COVID-19. SEEHN Secretariat application on: "***Strengthening capacities of nurses - front line healthcare workers during the COVID-19 response; Strong nurses for strong health systems and a healthier world***", has been approved. The total budget amounts at 39,850.00 EUR. The project is under implementation phase during the II semester of 2020 and covers the following countries: ALB, BiH, MNE, MKD, MDA, and SR.

The SEEHN Secretariat was conducting all the activities and procedure linked to the project activities implementation. It started with mapping and identifying the training modules for implementation of the planned Emergency training. Two experts were engaged to develop a questionnaire and conduct an online survey with relevant stakeholders from member states to identify the course subjects needed to be further developed. The member states nominated National focal points (NFP) for implementation and coordination at national level the project activities.

The official kick-off meeting of the NFPs was organized in virtual format on the 18th of September. The Secretariat presented the aim of the project and a timeline of the deliverables and milestones of the project, the state of the art and challenges, to provide the participants with a common understanding of tasks, defined roles, responsibilities, and concrete next steps.

The SEEHN Secretariat, also, organized the First Regional Webinar “Primary Healthcare as main gatekeeper and crucial systemic element in the COVID-19 containment”, on 26 October 2020. Around 35 participants from BiH, MDA, MKD, MNE, SRB, CEI representatives and experts from the National Institute of Public Health from Italy⁷ and Lazzaro Spallanzani National Institute for Infectious Diseases⁷ and from the Istituto Superiore di Sanita⁷ joined online.

Nurses are one of the core pillars of the health systems and are at the forefront of the COVID-19 response – providing care and playing a critical role in emergency risk reduction, preparedness and response. Primary health care nurses are often the first ones to get in direct contact with potential COVID-19 positive patients providing guidance and collecting samples for the diagnostic. They also provide the essential care for the patients, they coordinate efforts with other health professionals and other members of the response team during emergencies. Without well-prepared and protected healthcare staff, there is no effective response to health threats.

Participants contributed to discussions on the primary health care crucial role as gatekeeper and first line contact with potential COVID-19 patients. Discussions focused on the ways to bridge the gap between nurses, patients and GPs and or hospitals in order to enhance community containment and to improve COVID-19 case-management. One of the highlighted nurses’ roles was on how to strengthen the prevention, promotion and advocacy work of the nurses.

RHDC on human resources in health (HRH) hosted by Moldova is involved as a center of technical expertise to equalize the knowledge at the regional level. It is also responsible to create and maintain a regional database for the PHC nurses in all the countries involved in the training within the project and in the follow-up phase.

During the reported period, the SEEHN Secretariat organized the procedure to ***Development of training modules*** by international experts, based on the results from the conducted survey and identified modules. The activity was followed by the training of trainers, that were carried out in two tours⁷. One group of trainees included 5 nurses from

⁷ The third followed in January 2021.

each beneficiary countries involved in a training over five days. The trainings were held online, in November and December 2020.

Primary Healthcare Systems are the gatekeeper for hospitalizations and management of the mild COVID-19 cases and rehabilitation at home, in the same time keeping down the pressure from the hospital system. PHC is a crucial element that shall be strengthened, as well, to ensure the continuum of care for the other patients with chronic NCDs, immunization plans, etc.

SEE Network on Workers Health

Furthermore, SEEHN partnered with the SEE Network on Workers Health (Institute of Occupational Health, MKD, WHO Collaborative Center on Occupational Health) that coordinates the health of the workers' area within the SEE Network on Workers Health (SEENWH⁸). The COVID-19 pandemic put health workers at the highest risks. SEEHN Secretariat initiated a proposal for a partnership research with SEENWH on the stress and burn out among the healthcare workers during the COVID-19 pandemic, in June 2020. The data collection process has been organized and carried out in SEEHN MSs. The results of this research are expected by the end of 2020. It will be used in planning prevention, promotion, preserving mental health in the risk groups from the SEE Region. It is also an excellent example of informed based policy taking process.

Project HOPE

SEEHN Secretariat with representatives of Project HOPE, implemented a common project during May –August 2020. The project targeted strengthening capacities of the health workers on COVID-19. Project HOPE and the Center for Human Rights and Humanitarian Studies at the Watson Institute of Brown University have partnered to create an on-online free Training-of-Trainers (ToT) program that provides the critical skills and knowledge necessary for health workers to respond rapidly and efficiently to COVID-19. This model allowed to engage master trainers and coach new trainers in order to quickly build a cadre of competent instructors in the country, who can “scale down” the training. The ToT aim was to ensure widespread adoption of the critical skills and knowledge necessary for health workers to respond rapidly and efficiently to COVID-19 in their work places and communities, while protecting their own health. The course was held on the digital platform zoom. The project has been implemented in Republic of Albania, Montenegro and Republic of Serbia, comprising 51 participants from respective SEEHN member states.

Multi-stakeholder partnerships

During the COVID-19 pandemics, WHO and CEI established a common taskforce, that SEEHN Secretariat Director have joined it. During 2020, regular, monthly, online meetings

⁸ SEENWH is a centre with knowledge and expertise, experience, holding a network of experts from 9 countries (ALB, BUL, ROM, MNE, CRO, SER, BIH, Turkey, MKD) on occupational health issues.

have been held. The health experts engaged in the joint CEI-WHO Task Force are discussing on the latest information on the development of COVID-19 outbreak in the CEI region and tabled options to bring it under control in the transition phase⁹.

A common TC with selected partners (**European Health Forum Gastein, the Institute of Public Health of Italy, EuroHealthNet, SEENWH Institute of Occupational Health of the MKD, WHO Collaborative Center¹⁰**) aimed to discuss with partners the common efforts to fight COVID-19. The TC participants exchanged their experience on the COVID-19 measures applied in different countries across Europe. The interlocutors discussed as well activities and possibilities for common responses to the ongoing disruption from COVID-19.

Throughout the reporting period SEEHN Secretariat continued efforts in developing further on partnerships and bilateral or multi-lateral actions in various health areas aimed to contribute the strengthening of MSs health systems under the general framework of the Chisinau Pledge.

7. Technical Activities of the SEEHN RHDCs

The Chisinau Pledge Action Plan was adopted at the 40th Plenary session in Israel in July, 2018. The strategic planning document for cooperation calls upon joint action of the Member states with partners on:

- Sustaining and strengthening the regional cooperation in public health by taking deliberate action to influence governance in other policy arenas to promote and protect health, and
- Achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals by taking advantage of the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development to renew countries' commitments to health and to seek inter-sectoral action to advance the priorities of the European Health 2020 policy framework towards 2030.

The SEEHN has nine formally designated RHDC for technical collaboration in various mutually agreed public health areas.

The performance of the RHDCs varies between Member States and the topics and is mostly dependant on the financing of their activities. In line with the SEEHN MoU, each Member

⁹ <https://www.cei.int/news/8849/cei-who-second-task-force-meeting-considers-optimal-transition-approach-in-cei-countries>

¹⁰ European Health Forum Gastein- Dr Dorli Kahr-Gottlieb, The Institute of Public Health of Italy - Dr Luca Rosi, EuroHealthNet – Dr Caroline Costongs, SEENWH Institute of Occupational Health of the Republic of North Macedonia (MKD), WHO Collaborative Center, Prof Dr. Jovanka Bislimovska

State with a designated RHDC does have financial obligations only during the first year of the respective Centre's designation. After that, RHDC shall take the ownership with the support of the SEEHN to fundraise, implement, manage and coordinate the regional collaborative activities in the respective area.

For the first time SEEHN Secretariat decided to support its own structures - the Regional Health Development Centres. In this respect, SEEHN Secretariat launched in the fall a Call for Project Proposals and developed Guideline for Applicants. The Grant scheme for 2019-2020 years was the first attempt to select projects that contribute the achievement of the strategic objectives defined within the Chisinau Pledge to be implemented in Partnership. The eight main directions for work were designed to respond to the needs of the region and to add value to cooperation in South Eastern Europe in the health areas for the next four years. The administrative procedures linked to the application were managed by the SEEHN Secretariat. Several RHDCs applied and were accepted to be supported during 2019-2020 period. Two out of 4 applications were implemented in 2019 on the RHDC on Public Health Services and the RHDC on NCDs. However, due to COVID-19 outbreak the other 2 applications of RHDC on Accreditation and Continuous Quality Improvement of Health Care and the RHDC on Human Resources for Health are in the pipeline to be implemented as soon as the situation allows.

The SEEHN Secretariat continued the work as planned to provide further support to the SEE RHDCs as it has been agreed that the technical collaboration and outcomes at regional and national levels is of utmost importance for the Network and its international visibility.

7.1. RHDC SECID

SEEHN Secretariat had a number of **TC with SECID representatives on the COVID-19 outbreak**. However, one that have been attended by the representatives of almost all SEEHN Member States,¹¹ Dr Hans Henri P. Kluge, WHO Regional Director for Europe, Dr Dorit Nitzan Coordinator, Health Emergencies and Operation Management, Dr. L. Licari and Mr Robb Butler from WHO EURO, observer from Kosovo*¹², had been held on **24 March 2020**. The goal of the TC was to discuss the challenges that SEEHN Member States are facing in the response to COVID-2019 (quantity of available tests, capacity for testing, capacity for isolating measures, lack of consumable material; lack of human resources, the need for mobilization of additional expertise, etc.), in order to agree on regional actions needed in addition to the national responses each country was already taking individually¹³.

¹¹ Except Romania

¹² * This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence

¹³ Minutes of the discussions held are available at the SEEHN Secretariat per mail request.

The South East European Center for Infectious Disease (SECID) and the Member States of the SEEHN organized SARI ILI Surveillance **Annual Meeting Teleconference via Zoom on 22 July 2020**. In addition to Member States representatives from eight countries, the meeting was also joined by representatives from CDC, USA, the WHO Euro and the ECDC.

The aim of the meeting was to present the functioning and challenges of SARI and ILI Sentinel Surveillance implementation in SEE countries, and how these systems can be strengthened to face uncertainty and other challenges for the next Influenza Season and COVID-19.

SECID and other network members of CORDS, along with other partners from POHA, BOHC, and EMPHNET, convened in Bangkok in December 2019 to strategize implementation of the Fleming Fund CORDS AMR Regional Grant. During spring 2020 they conducted a mapping and gap analysis of current AMR surveillance systems and opportunities in 17 countries of Africa and Asia. The mapping of existing AMR surveillance systems helped to identify:

- different approaches for monitoring emergence and spread of AMR, including the range of baseline data,
- models and mechanisms for AMR surveillance, capacity building in the different country or regional settings,
- opportunities to develop common, One Health surveillance protocols.

Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, partners have been committed to continue the work, employing strategies such as conducting interviews virtually and working with local experts. Based on mapping and gap analysis results and review of existing guidelines, SECID and other PARSE partners are currently developing common protocols, standard operational procedures and identifying pilot locations.

7.2. RHDC on Mental Health, Bosnia and Herzegovina

Due to the COVID-19 disruption and its strong implications on mental health, and in order to revitalize the RHDC on Mental Health, SEEHN Secretariat in May 2020 officially approached Bosnian health authorities hosting the RHDC on Mental Health, with the proposal to conduct an *analysis of the situation in the mental health field in the Member States of SEEHN, compared with the analysis made in 2014*. The aim of this study will be to make a review of all efforts and developments in each country and in the region as well. The proposal is that the technical part is supported/delivered by the Department for scientific research at the University Clinic of Psychiatry Skopje, Republic of North Macedonia.

7.3. RHDC on NCDs, Podgorica, Montenegro

SEE Health Network “Round Table on Reduction of Childhood Malnutrition and Control of Marketing of Unhealthy Food and Beverages Impact”, was organized on 25 February 2020, Podgorica, Montenegro. The Round Table was prepared by the SEEHN RHDC on NCDs from Montenegro and SEEHN Secretariat under the Montenegro SEEHN Presidency. The specific objective of the meeting was to review the national policies, recommendations and guidelines in SEE Health Network member states. (Western Balkans and beyond), regarding children nutrition with focus on the preschool and school facilities and to review the possibilities to control the impact of marketing of food and non-alcoholic beverages high in calories, free sugars, salt and saturated fats on children.

This Round table was the first activity in a row of activities with overall objective to reduce childhood malnutrition by focusing especially on obesity and to enable healthy lifestyle choices from the early age among children. The meeting was attended by experts involved in the specific work in policies development and promotion in the nine SEEHN member states (Annex 6 Summary Report). EuroHealthNet in their monthly newsletter have published the information related to the SEEHN experts meeting, highlighting the importance of the subject and the possibilities to exchange knowledge and experience in this area¹⁴.

7.4. RHDC on National Observatory in Human Workforce in Health, Moldova

During the reporting period, RHDC on Human Resources in Health in Moldova has been negotiating the organization of the *Multi-country workshop on Coping with Non-Communicable Diseases in the Nursing and Midwifery Workforce* in SEEHN Member States.

Unfortunately, due to the COVID-19 pandemic the event is postponed for 2021.

RHDC on Human Resources in Health was extensively involved in the CEI funded project. The aim was to strengthen capacities of the RHDC.

7.5. RHDC on Sexual and Reproductive Health

Finally, SEEHN Secretariat supported the RHDC hosted by Romania on Sexual and Reproductive Health (SHR) to establish the **SEEHN Thematic Network on Sexual and Reproductive Health**. This initiative reflects the technical collaboration within SEEHN and is led by the Regional Health Development Center in Romania¹⁵. It was established to coordinate and implement regional activities on the needs and priorities in sexual and

¹⁴ <https://eurohealthnet.eu/newsletter-article-hh/may-2020/eurohealthnet-partnership-and-brussels-office>

¹⁵ The East European Institute for Reproductive Health hosts the SEEHN RHDC on Sexual and Reproductive Health (SHR).

reproductive health with the SEEHN Member States. Another direction will also include collecting data on COVID-19 infection in pregnancy to inform prevention and treatment in the SEEHN Member states. The national Focal Points network was updated and revived. However, the connection and interaction might be improved to foster exchanges and actions.

8. Main challenges & Conclusions

The disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic impacted hugely on every possible way in the SEE Region. Against all odds in the middle of the year, we still hoped on some positive scenarios, however, the second wave hit was much larger than predicted.

The perennial key challenges faced over the years were intensified by the array of COVID-19 effects. The health systems are at the edge, as well as, the human resources pressure, economic downfalls, political instabilities, pandemic fatigue and all previous challenges present in the SEE Region.

The SEEHN Secretariat turned all the operation online. The measure allowed to be connected to our stakeholders despite the geographical distance. The matters of national safety kept our counterparts under a lot of pressure, however, in important situations almost all NHCs demonstrated commitment. In this context, SEEHN Secretariat is acknowledging all the dedication and efforts of the NHC, RHDC representatives and Partners which allowed to fulfil the Secretariat mandate in the best possible way.

The second semester of 2020 was marked by SEEHN Secretariat undertaking a new role as an implementing agency. Until now, SEEHN was focused on better supporting the countries in their endeavours. Albeit, SEEHN Secretariat as a regional organization can be a vehicle for change in more than one country. Currently, the experience to implement from the house a project in five member states is in progress. Challenges to this stage fall under the category to reach out our stakeholders through the multitude of information and responsibilities they face nationally. To this end, way of better communication and commitment might be envisaged.

Additionally, SEEHN Secretariat capacities should be strengthened to ensure sustainability and high technical expertise through continuous learning aimed at best service, steady efforts and underpin the SEEHN and Executive Committee. In order to improve the performance level and optimize the processes and future developments of SEEHN at its core organization and its governance and institutional mechanisms, standard operational procedures are an essential need to be developed and approved.



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Furthermore, it is necessary to be underlined that although the work of the SEEHN Secretariat has been strengthened in this reporting period, due to continuous political changes in the Region the Secretariat faced many challenges and setbacks that have been addressed timely with great professionalism and devotion to the SEEHN.

The yearly contribution transfers are another continuous matter of discussion. However, the SEEHN Secretariat has flexibility to ensure mobility across budget lines to sustain operational flow. This year, contributions were transferred by 7 SEEHN Member States for 2019-2020 period and one MS paid contributions for 2021. Still, two countries have debts 2019-2020 period and a solution would be to reschedule payment in tranches.

The SEEHN Regional Health Development Centers need consistent support. COVID-19 pandemic has jeopardized the Secretariat intention to provide close support to boost capacities within RHDCs. The technical collaboration is of extreme importance and is a key to the future success of the SEEHN. It is only through intensive and high quality technical work at both regional and national levels that the Network can produce visible results that are useful and valuable to the national authorities and will keep them motivated and committed to sustain the Network as an international organization. Two planned activities with RHDCs hosted by Serbia and Moldova have to be postponed to the first semester of 2021. Another possibility would be to consider online technical events for immediate future if acceptable by consensus of all member states. Another way of supporting the RHDCs is currently applied to the RHDCs hosted by Romania and Moldova, through steady support to a programmatic activity. RHDC in Romania on Sexual and Reproductive Health initiated a thematic network of highly specialized actors. The region would greatly benefit from such a possibility of connection and also sharing experience. Since there are differences from country to country, however, the background is similar and diversity would just enrich SEEHN participants. A challenge spotted that need to be addressed is the level of enthusiasm and commitment. At the same time, it is worth mentioning the great support provided by the Romanian Presidency to launch the latest mentioned initiative lead by RHDC on SRH.

Finally, COVID-19 outbreak challenged and slowed down the planned list of TAIEX Multi-Country workshops in the SEEHN Member States events. Another 3 accepted projects of TAIEX Multi-country workshops are postponed a couple of times. The workshops to be held in Albania, Montenegro and Republic of Moldova could not be organized as scheduled. A new timesheet was negotiated and agreed for 2021 along with the online format to be applied.

The SEEHN is acting according to the Chisinau Pledge priorities and Action Plan as well as the Sub-Regional Cooperation Strategy. At the same time, SEEHN shall follow and streamline towards the global and European efforts for achieving universal health coverage,



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achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and leaving no-one behind in these challenging times.



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Annex 1. Financial Report 2021-narrative

Annex 2. Financial Plan for 2021-narrative

Annex 3. The draft document: The South Eastern Europe Health Network Communication plan for 2021

Annex 4 Current status of the SEEHN-TAIEX multi-country events implementation

NOTE: All Annexes are shared with NHCs and Alternates via e-mail on the occasion of different meetings held in 2020; Also they are available at Secretariat upon request.