

PANORAMA PEOPLE



SRC team: Lucianne Licari, Marija Kishman Hristovska, Caroline Bollars, Christian Peter Schweizer, Bahtygul Karriyeva, Gabriela Irene Fuentes Ceja.

Meet the Strategic Relations with Countries team

by Lucianne Licari
Director, Country Support and Communications

What is the role of Strategic Relations with Countries (SRC)?

The SRC team, based in the WHO Regional Office for Europe in Copenhagen, coordinates the country-specific work of the Regional Office and provides strategic guidance. At the same time, we keep countries up to date on WHO's work and its global and regional priorities, and so we act as a bridge between countries and the Organization.

The team is made up of strategic desk officers who work under the leadership of the Director of Country Support and Communications and the policy direction of the Regional Director, and in line with the Organization's country strategy, to ensure a coherent, tailored approach to the work of the Regional Office in and with countries.

How does SRC support WHO's country work in practice?

SRC works in a variety of ways to carry out its role. One of our core responsibilities is to assist Member States in developing

the formal tools used as the basis for collaboration between a country and WHO: country cooperation strategies (CCSs) and biennial collaborative agreements (BCAs). This enables us to ensure coherence between the individual CCSs and BCAs and regional priorities.

Working with all teams in the Regional Office and country offices, the SRC team shares knowledge and experience from countries with the rest of the Organization and is contributing to the establishment of an information hub that will ensure that staff can obtain up-to-date and accurate information on the Regional Office's country work.

The strategic desk officers of the SRC team act as the focal points for the countries allocated to them. This enables them to ensure that work in and with these countries is aligned with key strategic directions and regional country work priorities.

The strategic desk officers also contribute to the development of regional work plans and monitor the relevance and timeliness of Regional Office technical assistance to countries.

In addition, SRC prepares and publishes an information document on country performance, which provides up-to-date information on the Regional Office's country presence and on WHO's achievements and impact at country level.

What other activities does SRC carry out to strengthen relations between WHO and individual countries?

SRC liaises directly with ministries of health as well as via a network of national counterparts (NCs) and through country offices.

We regularly organize visits by health ministers to the Regional Office in Copenhagen for strategic discussions, as well as other high-level visits to and from Member States. At the same time, we assist the Regional Office and country offices in the preparation and management of major policy and technical events in countries, as required.

Another way of bringing countries and the Regional Office closer together is through country days that SRC coordinates and facilitates. Country days allow in-depth discussions to be held among national authorities and divisions of the Regional Office and WHO representatives (WRs), where applicable, on health issues specific to a country and the support that WHO can provide in tackling them.

Another aspect of our work is supporting the Regional Director, the Director-General and senior management of the Regional Office in their meetings with high-level national health authorities through the development of strategic, country-specific briefings.

Who are your main counterparts when working in countries?

SRC works directly with ministries of health as well as via the network of NCs and through country offices, of which there are currently 29 in the Region. All Member States, with or without a WHO country office, have appointed NCs.

If WHO has an office in a country, SRC works with and through that office. Each country office is led by a WR, who acts as technical adviser to the government, in particular on the development of health policies, governance, strategies and programmes. The WR also coordinates health activities supported by international agencies both within and outside the

United Nations system. A WR represents the WHO Director-General, Regional Director and the Organization as a whole in the country of his/her assignment.

One of our responsibilities is to help build the capacity and skills of the WR to help them carry out their work as effectively as possible. In some cases, they require training to boost their skills in one or more areas; but they also have valuable experiences to share with other WRs, and we provide forums to enable them to do so.

How does SRC build the capacity of WRs?

In various ways. For example, SRC organizes WR retreats, usually twice a year, which aim to build technical and managerial coherence and contribute to country offices delivering outcomes at country level in a consistent manner. During these retreats, the WRs can share best practices and learn about global and regional developments of relevance to their work.

We also ensure that the WRs are updated on new WHO regional and global initiatives and policies and inform them about innovative approaches and best practices in country work as applied by different country offices. This also includes experience from other regions, which is exchanged by SRC through the network of all regional country support units. In addition, the SRC team supports WRs in sharing relevant knowledge with other national stakeholders.

SRC organizes an induction programme at the Regional Office in Copenhagen for new WRs, which includes meetings and briefings with the SRC team and staff of technical divisions and the Division of Administration and Finance.

What about the NCs – what is their role?

NCs represent health ministries and are the formal counterparts for strategic cooperation with WHO. They are complemented by national technical focal points in specific programme areas. The system of NCs and national technical focal points was established by a Regional Committee decision in 2012, and much progress has been made since then in developing the network.

In countries with a WHO country office, the NC is responsible for country-level coordination of the BCA in close collaboration with the WR. In countries without a WHO country office, the NC plays a vital role in facilitating day-to-day liaison with the authorities on WHO-related issues, and on the development of a CCS if the Member State decides to have one.

SRC organizes regular virtual meetings with NCs with aim of updating them on the most important developments concerning cooperation with WHO and the work of WHO governing bodies, as well as briefing them on upcoming global or regional WHO events and initiatives.

How is SRC's work likely to develop in the future?

As you know, the World Health Assembly has just approved the Thirteenth General Programme of Work 2019–2023 (GPW 13). GPW 13 states that WHO will become more focused and effective in its country-based operations, engaging in policy dialogue, providing countries with strategic support and technical assistance, and coordinating service delivery, depending on the country's context. SRC's role in bridging countries and WHO technical programmes will therefore be crucial in implementing GPW 13.

Putting countries at the centre for WHO, as indicated in GPW 13, will also require more formal frameworks for collaboration, in other words the BCAs and the CCSs. There are currently seven CCSs in the WHO European Region, with Belgium, Cyprus, Italy, Malta, Portugal, the Russian Federation and Switzerland. Under the guidance of the Regional Director and through active engagement of its Member States, the Regional Office is committed to supporting the development of CCSs with its other Member States, and thus SRC's role in this regard will increase.

It will be more important than ever to ensure that WHO Member States have a full understanding of how WHO works at the national level. This is also vital for the continued implementation of the European Region's Health 2020 policy framework and for the longer-term process of reviewing and strengthening country work. Here again SRC, through the network of NCs, is playing a crucial role.

In order to deliver on GPW 13, a broader external engagement transformation agenda will also be required, led by the Director-General and the regional directors. That agenda aims to develop a new strategic and operational planning model to drive results in every country, tailored to each country's context. Among the priorities here is the need to ensure that CCSs drive GPW 13 priorities and support national strategic plans, and SRC will play an important role in boosting this bottom-up approach to planning, given its expertise and role in the CCS process. ■