
Terms of reference for the national counterpart and national (technical) focal points

WHO is firmly committed to working for, in and with Member States, as described in the new country strategy for the WHO Regional Office for Europe 2012–2014. Collaboration with countries is focused on mutually agreed priorities that reflect country needs and are matched with the Regional Office's capacity to deliver. In this context, the Regional Office is continuously trying to optimize the mechanisms for collaboration with Member States. The Regional Office has extensive experience of country work through the system of national counterparts (NCs) and national (technical) focal points (NFPs). Successful collaboration depends, to a large extent, on the commitment and efforts of national health authorities. It requires active involvement and fulfilment of commitments by all parties. While WHO staff are responsible for appropriate, efficient and effective use of resources to deliver quality products, the role of the relevant national authorities is crucial in achieving planned outcomes.

A. National Counterpart (NC)

In the context of the above, the work of the WHO national counterpart will be subject to the following specifications:

Activities and tasks

The NC will act as a contact person for communication on strategic and technical issues between the WHO Regional Office for Europe and the Member State. He or she will present the health ministry's views on collaboration with the Regional Office, providing overall support and coordination and performing specific technical tasks if necessary and when applicable to his or her competence, or in other cases by involving experts with specific expertise. The NC's contribution to the process of collaboration with WHO will be recognized by the national government and/or national employer as an integral part of the NC's responsibilities at country level. To that end, clear discussions will be held at country level, to identify what is expected from the NC in the context of mutual collaboration and what percentage of the appointed individual's time will be allocated to collaboration with WHO.

Appointment

Usually, at the beginning of the Biennial Collaborative Agreement (BCA) planning process, each health ministry or equivalent will be asked by the WHO Regional Office for Europe, through an official letter, to appoint/reconfirm the appointment of the NC for all BCA-related activities or for overall strategic cooperation with the Regional Office. It is advisable that a single candidate be selected for the entire Organization, including WHO headquarters. Under normal circumstances, the duration of appointment will correspond to the biennial period. Prior to the beginning of each new biennium, the appointment should be reconfirmed, or a new one mutually agreed. Should there be a need for a change of NC, the Government will inform WHO in a timely manner through the Country Office (where applicable).

The list of NCs appointed by ministries of health is published on the Regional Office's internal web site.

B. National (technical) focal points (NFPs)

Activities and tasks

The precise type(s) of activities and tasks of an NFP will depend on the nature of the technical job involved in each programme. But, in general, an NFP would be expected to:

- provide reviewed, updated and analysed country-specific data;
- disseminate best practice and information gained from WHO through public presentations and participation in debates;
- facilitate addressing public health problems in selected technical area(s) through health systems strengthening;
- advocate for health policy, in particular, in institutional circles, fora, etc.; and
- support Region-wide and global developments through international WHO advisory bodies/mechanisms.

Furthermore, in countries with a BCA, the NFP will:

- contribute to the planning, implementation and monitoring of BCA activities within his or her area of responsibility;
- interact regularly with the Head of WHO Country Office (HoCO) as well as with the NC on technical activities undertaken within the framework for cooperation;
- participate in monitoring and analysing the achievement of specific country expected results.

Criteria for selection of the National (Technical) Focal Point

The NFP is nominated by the Ministry of Health or equivalent, and should be a person working in the Ministry or in an institution related to it, which may or may not be officially designated as a WHO Collaborating Centre. While the Ministry of Health, or equivalent, will be responsible for the overall coordination of work with WHO, the NFP is expected to:

- have adequate technical competence in the area of collaboration;
- have sufficient seniority, experience and adequate official status to facilitate effective communication at all levels, from senior political figures to health institutions within a particular programme/area of work;
- have adequate links to the work of the national health system and the health policy development process; and
- be in a position to gain support from relevant national experts and institutions.

Although a good knowledge of English would be preferable, it is not a condition for the appointment of an NFP.

Appointment

Health ministries are asked to nominate NFPs whenever a related activity is taking place at intercountry level, multicountry level and national level. The NFP for a particular technical area should ideally be the same throughout the biennium. It is common practice, however, that WHO technical programmes check to make sure there is no alternate proposed for any new planned technical activity. Although a Member State can appoint more than one NFP as each represents a particular technical area/programme of work, there can only be one NFP per area and, if necessary, he or she can then appoint/involve other national experts as needed, in consultation with the ministry.

The WHO Regional Office for Europe will collate the list of NFPs appointed to liaise with its technical programmes and share it with WHO Representatives and HoCOs, as well as with the unit dealing with strategic relations with countries (SRC). The names of the NFPs will also be forwarded to the NC by SRC/HoCOs, to ensure closer collaboration at national level.

C. Lines of authority and accountability of NCs and NFPs

It is important to note that, in the context of joint activities (in which, by definition, the WHO Regional Office and the Ministry of Health make a joint effort towards common achievements), the NC represents the Ministry of Health. The NC may not be engaged in private bilateral negotiations with any other institution on behalf of WHO.

The NFP, on the other hand, will work in collaboration with the WHO staff responsible for the technical programme (at both country and regional levels) and closely coordinate all activities with the HoCO, as well as with the NC. Technical guidance for NFPs is provided by WHO staff (programme manager).