

# Role of National Immunization Technical Advisory Groups (NITAG) in COVID-19 vaccine effectiveness studies in the region

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Status Update and Important Considerations  
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# Outline

- What is a NITAG
- Composition and membership of NITAGs
- Role of NITAGs
- What NITAGs should not do
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- NITAGs & COVID-19 VE studies
- Summary

# What is a NITAG

- Group of national experts empowering the MoH and advising on all technical and scientific topics related to vaccines and immunization
- Formally established by the MoH through a decree (or official note) to whom they in turn forward their recommendations
- Such recommendations are evidence-based and independent of political and industrial influence

# Composition and membership of NITAG

- Core Members (10 to 15 members): subject matter experts such as
  - Paediatrics, Adult Medicine, Epidemiology
  - Infectious Diseases, Public Health, Immunology
  - Clinical (research), Health Systems and Delivery, Health Economics
- Non- Core Members (5 to 10 members): represent either government (ex-officio) or non-government (liaison) entities
  - Government: different relevant ministries (health, planning, finance etc), NRA
  - Non-government: professional associations, WHO, Unicef etc
  - Although they are involved in discussions, they are not involved in making recommendations
- Core members (chairperson included) nominated following a well-established process for a specific number of years

# Role of NITAGs

- Empower and advise the national governments, MoH, EPI, and/or other relevant institutions and organizations on all technical and scientific topics related to vaccines and immunization
- The terms of reference of a NITAG are to advise on:
  - Latest scientific advancements and recommendations
  - Policy analysis and strategy formulation
  - Situation analysis and assessment
- The NITAG will have only a technical advisory role for all VPD
- Accordingly, disease-specific technical advisory groups, such as polio, measles, hepatitis, will function under the auspices of the NITAG

EPI: Expanded Programme on Immunization

VPD: Vaccine Preventable Diseases

MoH: Ministry of Health

NITAG: National Immunization Technical Advisory Group

# What NITAGs should not do

- Implement activities – role of the EPI program
- Supervise the EPI program – role of the MoH or those trained for the purpose
- Coordinate and support funding, planning, advocacy – role of the ICC
- Licensing, testing, inspecting, quality control and post market surveillance functions – role of NRA

EPI: Expanded Programme on Immunization  
ICC: Inter-agency Coordination Committee  
NRA: National Regulatory Authority  
NITAG: National Immunization Technical Advisory Group

# NITAGs and COVID-19

**NITAGs had to make some consequential adjustments to guide governments to promptly and correctly respond to the pandemic**

- Structure:
  - Additional expertise added in working groups (eg setting up a COVID-19 WG)
  - Setting goals and considerations for vaccine safety, vaccine effectiveness, reduction in disease transmission, morbidity and mortality, equity in vaccine allocation and distribution
- Functions
  - Strengthening secretariat with increase in meeting frequencies
  - Conducting virtual meetings and enhancing coordination
- Considerations
  - Making decisions/recommendations despite initial limited vaccine supply, data and information gaps
- Process
  - Underlining limitations and where assumptions need to be made
  - Identifying country priority groups with respect to available information and vaccine supply
  - Ensuring transparency and flexibility

# NITAGs and COVID-19 Vaccine Effectiveness studies

Very well fits under the ToR - situation analysis and assessment

- In the absence of national COVID-19 VE studies (or presence but not relevant to what NITAG is analysing)
- Clearly recommend COVID-19 VE studies:
  - When can the study be conducted?:
    - How many months after 1<sup>st</sup> use of vaccine?
    - Significant circulation of variants of concern? (Beta, Delta, Omicron)
  - Where should it be conducted?
    - Why region A and not B
    - Hospitals versus community
  - Why at that point in time (rational)?
    - No country specific information
    - Low public confidence with increasing infections despite vaccination
  - What age group or target of interest
    - Health care workers
    - Adults, adolescents, children
    - Hospitalized persons



# NITAGs and COVID-19 Vaccine Effectiveness studies

Very well fits under the ToR - situation analysis and assessment

- Review COVID-19 VE study proposals
  - Ensuring they are scientifically grounded
- Contribute to scientific knowledge
- Use of findings from COVID-19 VE studies
  - Review to guide the programme on COVID-19 vaccination (policy)
  - Revisit or update previous recommendation
    - vaccine use
    - target population
    - vaccination schedule
  - As a tool to monitor progress in COVID-19 population immunity
  - Provide local data to build in-country confidence

# Summary

- NITAG has a technical advisory role on topics related to vaccines and immunizations
- They make evidence-based and independent decisions and share their recommendations with the MoH
- They are not involved in implementation, supervision, coordination and licensing
- The structure, functioning, considerations and processes of the NITAG had to be adjusted because of the COVID-19 pandemic
- NITAGs can recommend COVID-19 VE studies, review proposals and use findings to guide or update existing policies on COVID-19 vaccination

# THANK YOU