
Scientific Advisory Group for the Origins of Novel Pathogens (SAGO)

Terms of Reference (20 August 2021)

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The rapid emergence and spread of SARS-CoV-2 has highlighted the importance of being prepared for any future event, to be able to identify novel pathogens early and to address the risk factors that contribute to their emergence and spread. In May 2020, the World Health Assembly, through resolution WHA73.1, requested the Director-General of the World Health Organization (WHO) to continue to work closely with the World Organization for Animal Health (OIE), the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and countries, as part of the One Health approach, to identify the source of the SARS-CoV-2 virus and the route of introduction to the human population.

There have been an increasing number of high threat pathogens emerging and re-emerging in recent years with, for example, SARS-CoV, MERS-CoV, Lassa, Marburg, Ebola, Nipah, avian influenza, the latest being SARS-CoV-2. There is not only need for robust surveillance and early actions for rapid detection and mitigation efforts, but a need for a robust and systematic processes to establish the study around the emergence of these pathogens and routes of transmission from their natural reservoirs to humans.

To this end, the Director-General has established the WHO Scientific Advisory Group for the Origins on Novel Pathogens (hereinafter referred to as ‘SAGO’). The SAGO will advise the WHO Secretariat on technical and scientific considerations regarding emerging and re-emerging pathogens, and will be composed of experts acting in a personal capacity. It will be established in accordance with the WHO Regulations for Study and Scientific Groups, Collaborating Institutions and Other Mechanisms of Collaboration.

The SAGO will act as an advisory body to WHO in this field.

I. Functions

In its capacity as an advisory body to WHO, the SAGO shall have the following functions:

1. To advise WHO on the development of a WHO global framework to define and guide studies into the origins of emerging and re-emerging pathogens of epidemic and pandemic potential;
2. To advise WHO on prioritizing studies and field investigations into the origins of emerging and re-emerging pathogens of epidemic and pandemic potential, in accordance with the WHO global framework described in point (1) above;

3. To provide information and views to assist the WHO Secretariat in the development of a detailed work plan of the SAGO.
4. In the context of SARS-CoV-2 origins:
 - a. To provide the WHO Secretariat with an independent evaluation of all available scientific and technical findings from global studies on the origins of SARS-CoV-2;
 - b. To advise the WHO Secretariat regarding developing, monitoring and supporting the next series of studies into the origins of SARS-CoV-2, including rapid advice on WHO's operational plans to implement the next series of global studies into the origins of SARS-CoV-2, as outlined in the Joint WHO-China Global Study of Origins of SARS-CoV-2: China Part report published on 30 March 2021, and advise on additional studies as needed; and
5. To provide additional advice and support to WHO, as requested by the WHO Secretariat, which may include participation in future WHO-international missions to study the origins of SARS-CoV-2 or for other emerging pathogens.

II. Composition

1. The SAGO shall have up to 25 members¹, who shall serve in their personal capacities to represent the broad range of disciplines relevant to emerging and re-emerging pathogens. In the selection of the SAGO members, consideration shall be given to attaining an adequate distribution of technical expertise, geographical representation and gender balance.
2. Members of the SAGO are expected to have significant expertise in one or more of the following technical disciplines in order to ensure a One Health approach: infectious disease epidemiology and conducting epidemiological studies, field research, virology, ecology, molecular epidemiology, sero-epidemiology, medicine, bioinformatics, outbreak analytics, health statistics, microbiology, veterinary medicine, food safety, bacteriology, environmental science, biosafety, biosecurity, occupational health and safety, or laboratory safety and security, ethics and social sciences, or other activities related to the emergence or re-emergence of pathogens of pandemic potential.
3. Members of the SAGO, including the Chairperson, shall be selected and appointed by WHO following an open call for experts. The Chairperson's functions include the following:
 - to chair the meeting of the SAGO;
 - to liaise with the WHO Secretariat between meetings.

In appointing a Chairperson, consideration shall be given to gender and geographical representation.

¹ Members serve as full participants and partake in the decision-making process of the meeting in which they are involved.

4. Members of the SAGO shall be appointed to serve for a period of 2 years and shall be eligible for reappointment. A Chairperson is eligible for reappointment as a member of the SAGO, but is only permitted to serve as Chairperson for one term. Their appointment and/or designation as Chairperson may be terminated at any time by WHO if WHO's interest so requires or, as otherwise specified in these terms of reference or letters of appointment. Where a member's appointment is terminated, WHO may decide to appoint a replacement member.
5. SAGO members must respect the impartiality and independence required of WHO. In performing their work, members may not seek or accept instructions from any Government or from any authority external to the Organization. They must be free of any real, potential or apparent conflicts of interest. To this end, proposed members/members shall be required to complete a Declaration of Interests form and their appointment, or continuation of their appointment, shall be subject to the evaluation of completed forms by the WHO Secretariat, determining that their participation would not give rise to a real, potential or apparent conflict of interest.
6. Following a determination that a proposed member's participation in the SAGO would not give rise to a real, potential or apparent conflict of interest, the proposed member will be sent a letter inviting them to be a member of the SAGO. Their appointment to SAGO is subject to WHO receiving the countersigned invitation letter and letter of agreement. Notwithstanding the requirement to complete the WHO Declaration of Interest form, SAGO members have an ongoing obligation to inform the WHO of any interests real or perceived that may give rise to a real, potential or apparent conflict of interest.
7. As contemplated in paragraph II.5 above, WHO may, from time to time, request SAGO members to complete a new Declaration of Interest form. This may be before a SAGO meeting or any other SAGO-related activity or engagement, as decided by WHO. Where WHO has made such a request, the SAGO member's participation in the SAGO activity or engagement is subject to a determination that their participation would not give rise to a real, potential or apparent conflict of interest.
8. Where a SAGO member is invited by WHO to travel to an in-person SAGO meeting, WHO shall, subject to any conflict of interest determination as set out in paragraph II.7 above, issue a letter of appointment as a temporary adviser and accompanying memorandum of agreement (together 'Temporary Adviser Letter'). WHO shall not authorize travel by a SAGO member, until it receives a countersigned Temporary Adviser Letter.
9. SAGO members do not receive any remuneration from the Organization for any work related to the SAGO. However, when attending in-person meetings at the invitation of WHO, their travel costs and per diem shall be covered by WHO in accordance with the applicable WHO rules and policies.

III. Operation

1. The SAGO will meet regularly. SAGO meetings may be held in person (at WHO headquarters in Geneva or another location, as determined by WHO) or virtually, via video or teleconference. SAGO meetings may be held in open and/or closed session, as decided by the Chairperson in consultation with WHO.
 - (a) Open sessions: open sessions shall be convened for the sole purpose of the exchange of non-confidential information and views, and may be attended by observers (as defined in paragraph III.3 below).
 - (b) Closed sessions: the sessions dealing with the formulation of recommendations and/or advice to WHO shall be restricted to the members of the SAGO and essential WHO Secretariat staff.
2. The quorum for SAGO meetings shall be two thirds of the members.
3. WHO may, at its sole discretion, invite external individuals from time to time to attend the open sessions of an advisory group, or parts thereof, as “observers”. Observers may be invited either in their personal capacity, or as representatives from a governmental institution/intergovernmental organization, or from a non-state actor. WHO will request observers invited in their personal capacity to complete a confidentiality undertaking and a Declaration of Interests form prior to attending a session of the advisory group. Invitations to observers attending as representatives from non-state actors will be subject to internal due diligence and conflict of interest considerations in accordance with FENSA. Observers invited as representatives may also be requested to complete a confidentiality undertaking. Observers shall normally attend meetings of the SAGO at their own expense and be responsible for making all arrangements in that regard.
4. At the invitation of the Chairperson, observers may be asked to present their personal views and/or the policies of their organization. Observers will not participate in the process of adopting decisions and recommendations of the SAGO.
5. The SAGO may decide to establish smaller working groups (sub-groups of the SAGO) to work on specific issues. Their deliberations shall take place via teleconference or video-conference. For these sub-groups, no quorum requirement will apply; the outcome of their deliberations will be submitted to the SAGO for review at one of its meetings.
6. SAGO members are expected to attend meetings. If a member misses two consecutive meetings, WHO may end his/her appointment as a member of the SAGO.
7. Reports of each meeting shall be submitted by the SAGO to the WHO Director-General. All recommendations from the SAGO are advisory to WHO, who retains full control over any subsequent decisions or actions regarding any proposals, policy issues or other matters considered by the SAGO.

8. The SAGO shall normally make recommendations by consensus. If, in exceptional circumstances, a consensus on a particular issue cannot be reached, minority opinions will be reflected in the meeting report.
9. Active participation is expected from all SAGO members, including in working groups, teleconferences, and interaction over email. SAGO members may, in advance of SAGO meetings, be requested to review meeting documentation and to provide their views for consideration by the SAGO.
10. Deliberations of the SAGO shall be treated as strictly confidential. WHO shall determine the modes of communication by the SAGO, including between WHO and the SAGO members, and the SAGO members among themselves.
11. SAGO members shall not speak on behalf of, or represent, the SAGO or WHO to any third party.

IV. Secretariat

WHO shall provide the secretariat for the SAGO, including necessary scientific, technical, administrative and other support. In this regard, the WHO Secretariat shall provide the members in advance of each meeting with the agenda, working documents and discussion papers. Distribution of the aforesaid documents to observers will be determined by the WHO Secretariat.

V. Information and documentation

1. Information and documentation to which members may gain access in performing SAGO related activities shall be considered as confidential and proprietary to WHO and/or parties collaborating with WHO. In addition, by counter signing the letter of appointment and the accompanying letter of agreement referred to in section II.6 above, SAGO members undertake to abide by the confidentiality obligations contained therein and also confirm that any and all rights in the work performed by them in connection with, or as a result of their SAGO-related activities shall be exclusively vested in WHO.
2. SAGO members and observers shall not quote from, circulate or use SAGO documents for any purpose other than in a manner consistent with their responsibilities under these Terms of Reference.
3. WHO retains full control over the publication of the reports of the AG, including deciding whether or not to publish them.