

Dorothy Leab ⁽¹⁾, Ousmane Tamba Dia ⁽²⁾, Musonda Kasonde⁽³⁾, Shobhana Chitrakar-Rijal⁽²⁾,
(1) GaneshAID -a NonProfit consultancy company, UNICEF consultant; (2) UNICEF Program Division; (3) UNICEF Supply Division

BACKGROUND

United for addressing countries' immunization supply chain challenges

UNICEF supports countries in achieving their national immunization goals and strong supply chains help to improve equitable coverage and reduce mortality rates is essential. Without an adequate supply of vaccines at service delivery levels, children cannot be vaccinated against life-threatening diseases.

However, National Immunization Programs (NIPs) have been facing several challenges in ensuring equitable access to the expanded program on immunization (EPI) vaccines against preventable diseases. Safely storing and transporting vaccines and other immunization commodities to immunization delivery facilities is one of the biggest obstacles to protect people from vaccine preventable diseases, and especially in remote and hard-to-reach areas.

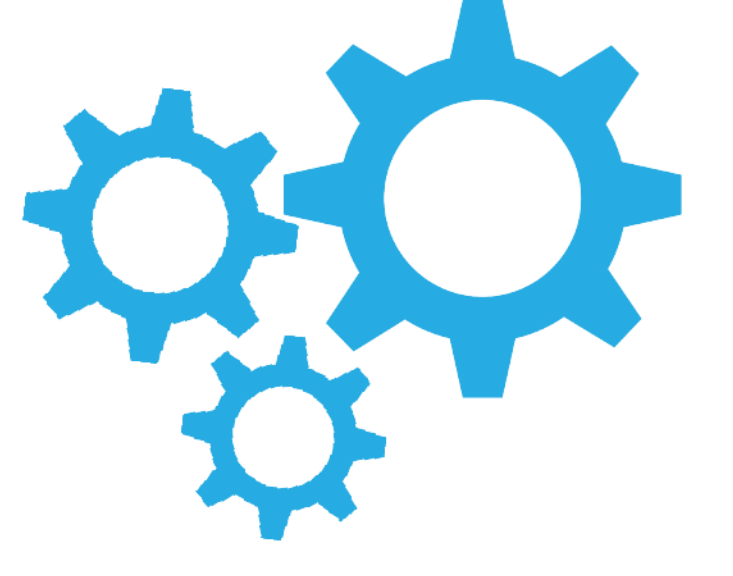
This is why, since 2015, the WHO-UNICEF Hub supports establishing and strengthening National Logistics Working Groups (NLWGs). These working groups are part of the Ministry of Health (MoH)'s process of strengthening immunization supply chains with the objective of continuous improvement in vaccines & immunization commodities availability, vaccine potency, and supply chain efficiency.

WHY SUPPORTING NLWG?

Strong leadership for systematic immunization supply chain improvements

There are critical barriers related to immunization supply chain: inventory predictability, inadequate cold chain capacity, insufficient funding, insufficient coordination of interventions, and low interest in iSCL policy. The effort should be in alignment with priorities to strengthen national immunization health systems. National ownership and leadership are essential to foster the commitment and collaborative atmosphere that are needed to enable country-led change.

This can happen with structured and powerful NLWGs.



WHAT IS NLWG?

A national logistics working group (NLWG) is a permanent mechanism for coordinating national immunization supply chain and logistics (iSCL) activities as well as supply chain management made by governmental agencies and development partners. NLWGs provide guidance, expertise and technical assistance on all matters concerning supply chain operation and improvement initiatives. NLWG engages with key stakeholders in the process:

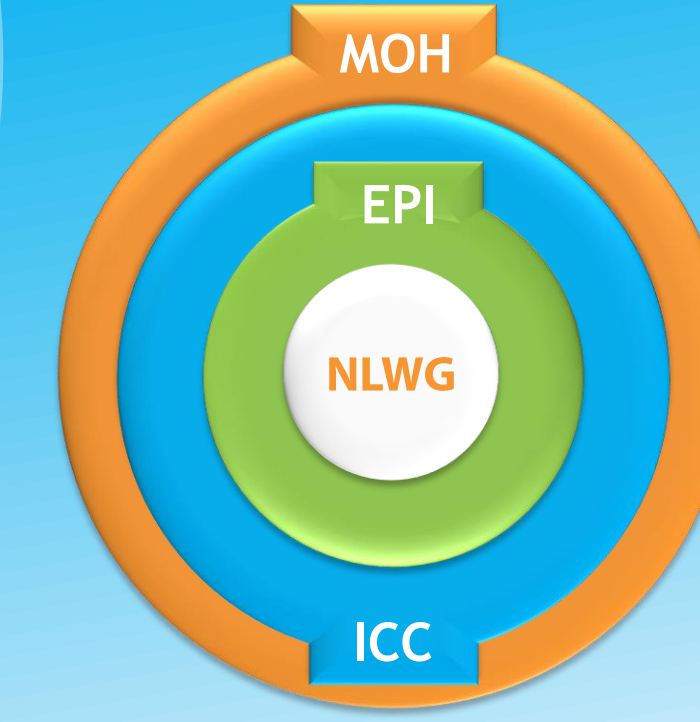
- to share information, evidence, and lessons learned;
- to identify and overcome program bottlenecks;
- to explore opportunities for innovations;
- to make optimal use of resources

Establishing and operating these working groups are part of the Ministry of Health's process of strengthening immunization supply chain with the objective of continuous improvement in the availability of vaccines and immunization commodities, vaccine potency, and supply chain efficiency.



NLWG engages with key stakeholders in the process to share information, evidence, and lessons learned; to identify and overcome program bottlenecks; to explore opportunities for innovation; and to make optimal use of resources.

NLWG operates as leadership and coordination groups to continuously improve immunization supply chain with key stakeholders.



NLWG'S MANDATE

EMPOWERING NATIONAL LOGISTICS WORKING GROUPS

Three levels of maturity

NLWG's performance criteria

Countries without an NLWG

The main point would be to check if iSCL is robust even without an NLWG. And then, identify if iSCL is supported sufficiently through existing groups even if not immunization program. If not and if poor iSCL performance, countries could be recommended, preferably, to foster integration of iSCL in existing SC groups. However, if not possible, then, countries might establish an NLWG with a set of KPIs.

Positioning

1. Formal legislative or administrative status
2. Members required to systematically declare any interest
3. The NLWG is consulted for any key decisions on immunization strategies and policies

Countries with existing but weak NLWG

The situation of iSCL should be reviewed through several assessments including EVMA and EPI reviews. If iSCL is weak, then the countries might be invited to reinforce functioning and technical capacities of their NLWGs.

Technical Capacity

1. Members selected based on acknowledged expertise in immunization supply chains and logistics
2. Proportion of action points implemented as per agreed timelines

Countries with existing and strong NLWG

How are they operating, how are iSCL issues addressed and what is the capacity level of the group members, etc. The question of integration and coordination of iSCL activities and investments with other commodities groups can be encouraged/supported, however this will depend on country national leaders and will require policy dialogue.

Functioning

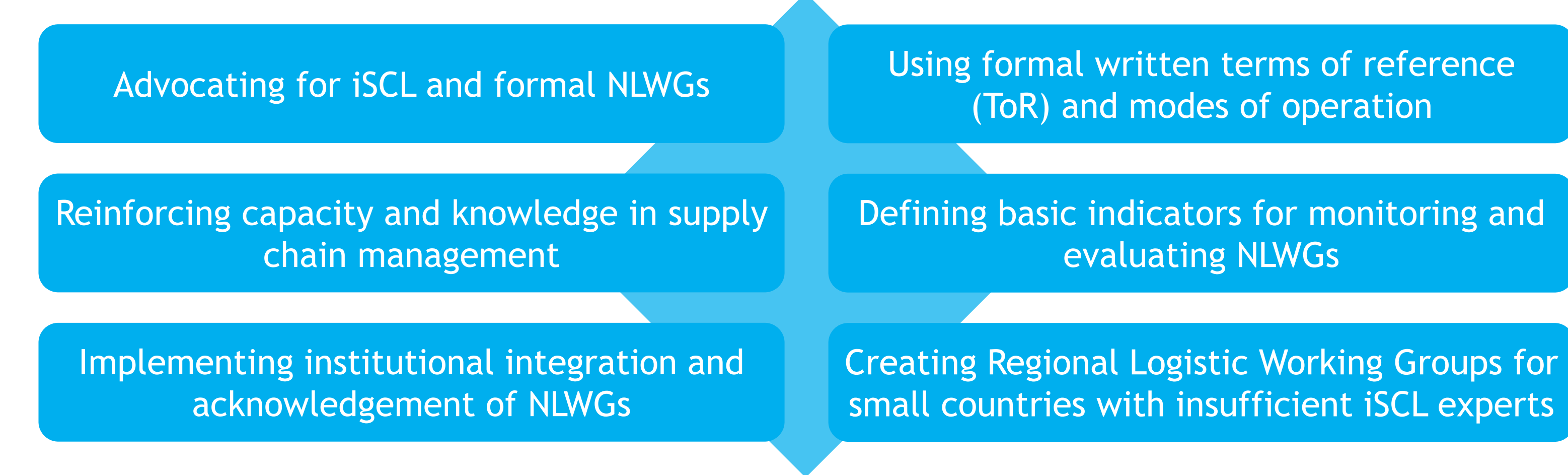
1. Formal written terms of reference
2. NLWG meets at least once/twice a month
3. Agendas and background documents are circulated at least one week ahead of meetings
4. Meeting reports and recommendations are circulated to decision makers and key stakeholders
5. Attendance rate for core members

WHO-UNICEF's approach to support NLWGs

Priority needs to empower NLWGs

- A landscape analysis study in 43 countries
- Technical assistance to establish and reinforce NLWGs
- A guidance document and toolkit
- National and regional NLWG training workshops,
- Advocacy materials including position paper, human interest stories, animated video, and best practices documentation.
- E-Learning module on Agora Platform

This priority also aligns with the strategic goals of the WHO and UNICEF immunization supply chain Hub to strengthen the capacity of countries and to intensify and coordinate efforts to catalyze immunization supply chains improvements through the comprehensive EVM process



WAY FORWARD

Country prioritisation will continue according to existing metrics such as Tier 1/2/3, donor priority countries, as well as through UNICEF country dashboards that document iSCL implementation in countries. As per the original goals, all Gavi eligible countries are at the very least to have an HR component embedded within their cIPs or other national plan, have all key managers trained on the STEP programme and in collaboration with the Hub, have a functional national logistics working group.



To foster strong leadership for systematic immunization supply chain improvements at country level, WHO and UNICEF will continue to support the establishment and strengthening of multi-stakeholder National Logistics Working Groups (NLWGs). UNICEF will intensify its support to NLWG as a direct vehicle to strengthen SC leadership and empower health workforce at all levels of the health systems. The revised approach will systematically integrate iSCL leadership, HR and NLWG.

Photo Credit: UNICEF