

Social Sector Hotline

February 13, 2017

GOVERNMENT CLEARS THE AIR ON 'CONFLICT OF INTEREST': NO FINANCIAL LINKAGE BETWEEN GATES FOUNDATION AND NTAGI

The Central Government has clarified that the institutional collaboration between Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation ("BMGF") and National Technical Advisory Group on Immunization ("NTAGI") is not financially linked.

BACKGROUND

NTAGI is the highest advisory body on immunization in the country which consists of independent experts who provide recommendations on vaccines after reviewing data on disease burden, efficacy and cost-effectiveness of vaccines.

However, there were concerns raised from certain quarters about the institutional independence of NTAGI as its Secretariat was believed to be financially supported by BMGF-funded Immunization Technical Support Unit ("ITSU") at the Public Health Foundation of India ("PHFI").

GOVERNMENT'S PRESS NOTE DATED FEBRUARY 8, 2017

The Ministry of Health & Family Welfare ("MoHFW") vide Press Note dated February 8, 2017 ("Press Note") has put to rest such speculations relating to 'conflict of interest' issue. The Government, through the Press Note, has clarified that there were no financial link of NTAGI with BMGF or any other organization as the body consisted of independent experts.

The Press Note clarified that in the last few years, many steps were taken to strengthen NTAGI by providing a Secretariat, establishing a code of practice and eventually institutionalizing it at the National Institute of Health & Family Welfare ("NIHFW"). The transitioning of the NTAGI Secretariat from ITSU to NIHFW was a planned activity and was part of the health system strengthening efforts by the Government.

The Press Note further clarified that transitioning of the NTAGI Secretariat from BMGF-funded ITSU to MoHFW would have no adverse impact on its functioning. Per the Press Note, technical support provided by ITSU to NTAGI shall continue till February 28, 2017 and the immunization project shall continue to support the immunization program in techno-managerial capacity beyond the above date. The Government, vide the Press Note, also clarified that it continues to collaborate with BMGF on National Health Mission.

ANALYSIS

BMGF's efforts in supporting public health programs in India has been widely acknowledged and appreciated. Such incidents of Government's disquiet will further discourage foreign foundations from engaging in philanthropic activities in India. Many foreign foundations, through their engagements in India, have helped Government implement public health projects more effectively, and they should be extended a welcome hand.

The transitioning of NTAGI Secretariat from ITSU, (which comes with the backdrop of a very public confrontation with Ford Foundation in India), it seems to suggest that the Government is still on a collision course with foreign foundations. On most occasions, it is observed that Government's reactions pertaining to 'conflict of interest' seem, most of the times, to be driven less by the force of reasoning, and more on prior assumptions.

Institutional collaborations by global foundations should not be seen by the government through the lens of political endorsements or hostilities.

Constant anxieties about credible foundations should not form part of bureaucratic narrative or administrative discourse of the Government. While call for greater accountability is always welcome, the Government should look into such issues 'dispassionately'- devoid of petulance and institutional crackdown.

There have already been significant commitments and contributions by major international foundations in India, any unwanted Government interference will only increase the trust deficit between them. Instead, the Government should encourage more institutional collaborations with international aid agencies and foundations, as they lend more credibility to public health projects and also impart fiscal discipline in the manner money is spent on such projects by state agencies.

– Rahul Rishi & Pratibha Jain

You can direct your queries or comments to the authors

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