

STAG-TB

STRATEGIC AND TECHNICAL ADVISORY GROUP FOR TUBERCULOSIS (STAG-TB)

Report of the 21st meeting
21–23 June 2021



Strategic and Technical Advisory Group for Tuberculosis (STAG-TB): report of the 21st meeting, 21-23 June 2021

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Introduction

The World Health Organization (WHO), through its Global Tuberculosis (TB) Programme (GTB), leads and guides the global effort to end the TB epidemic through universal access to people-centred prevention and care, multisectoral action and innovation. The major functions of the Global TB Programme include:

- providing global leadership to end TB through strategy development, political and multisectoral engagement, strengthening of reviews and accountability, and advocacy and partnerships (including with civil society);
- developing policy options, norms and standards of TB prevention and care, and facilitating their implementation;
- shaping the TB research and innovation agenda, and stimulating the generation, translation and dissemination of knowledge;
- providing specialized technical support for Member States and partners, and working with WHO regional and country offices to catalyse change and build sustainable capacity; and
- monitoring, evaluating and reporting on the status of the TB epidemic and progress in the financing and implementation of the End TB Strategy.

The Strategic and Technical Advisory Group for Tuberculosis (STAG-TB) is an expert advisory body that was established in 2001. STAG-TB's mission is to contribute to ending the TB epidemic and eventually eliminating the disease by providing state-of-the-art scientific and technical guidance to WHO. Its functions are as follows:

1. To provide to the WHO Director-General independent evaluation of the strategic, scientific and technical aspects of WHO's TB work.
2. To review, from a scientific and technical viewpoint, progress and challenges in WHO's TB-related core functions, including the content, scope and dimension of WHO's:
 - a. development of TB policies, strategies and standards in TB prevention, care and control;
 - b. collaboration with countries, and support of countries' efforts to control TB, including the provision of guidance and capacity-building on policies, strategies, standards and technical assistance;
 - c. TB epidemiological surveillance, monitoring, evaluation and operational research activities, their relevance to countries' efforts to end the TB epidemic and approaches to be adopted; and
 - d. promotion and support of partnerships and of advocacy and communications for TB prevention, care and control worldwide.
3. To review and make recommendations on the establishment of committees, working groups, and other means through which scientific and technical matters are addressed.
4. To advise on priorities between possible areas of WHO activities related to TB prevention, care and control.

STAG-TB reports to the WHO Director-General, and members are appointed by the WHO Director-General. The full terms of reference for STAG-TB are provided on the WHO STAG-TB website.¹

The 21st meeting of STAG-TB took place virtually on 21–23 June 2021. The agenda ([Annex 1](#)) included three major sessions (with the third divided into three topics), as follows:

1. Progress made on STAG-TB 2020 meeting recommendations.
2. Impact of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic on TB detection, disease burden and global targets.
3. WHO solutions to mitigate and reverse the COVID-19 impact on TB, structured according to the following three strategic areas of work:
 - a. Leadership.

¹ See <https://www.who.int/groups/strategic-and-technical-advisory-group-for-tuberculosis/about>.

- b. Country support.
- c. Technical products.

Session 1 included a presentation from the Director of the Global TB Programme, related feedback from the STAG-TB Chair on a briefing provided to the WHO Director-General, and a perspective from the WHO Civil Society Task Force (CSTF). Each of the remaining sessions started with a presentation by WHO staff, followed by commentaries from two discussants, and then by comments from the rest of the STAG-TB members. Each session was supported by a comprehensive background document that was made available to STAG-TB members 1–2 weeks in advance of the meeting. For Session 3b, a consolidated slide set providing updates from all six WHO regions was also provided. The background documents are considered internal documents intended to inform discussions during the meeting and are not available for wider circulation.

With the assistance of WHO session presenters and rapporteurs, session discussants developed draft recommendations following each session. During Day 3 of the meeting, all draft recommendations were reviewed and finalized by the entire membership of STAG-TB.

This report summarizes the sessions of the meeting, focusing on comments and recommendations from STAG-TB members. All reports of STAG-TB meetings are submitted by the Chair of STAG-TB and the Director of the WHO Global TB Programme to the Assistant-Director General, the Deputy Director-General and the Director-General of WHO, and posted on the WHO STAG-TB website ¹ in conjunction with a widely distributed newsletter.

The full list of participants is provided in [Annex 3](#).

1. Progress made on STAG-TB 2020 meeting recommendations (Session 1)

Dr Ariel Pablos-Méndez, Chair of the STAG-TB, provided the WHO Director-General with a summary of an April 2021 briefing of the 20th STAG-TB meeting, noting commendations of the work of the Global TB Programme and highlighting commitments made by the WHO Director-General:

- to support the development of an action plan to implement the STAG-TB recommendations that were made at the 20th meeting;
- to meet with the Executive Director of the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria (Global Fund) to discuss the prioritization of efforts to ending TB;
- to join the United Nations (UN) high-level meeting on TB that took place in early June 2021; and
- to send letters to ministers of health to inform them about the newly released WHO guidelines for TB and to further stress the need to work together towards reaching the SDGs, End TB Strategy and UN high-level meeting targets for TB.

Dr Tereza Kasaeva, Director of the Global TB Programme, presented on progress made by WHO on implementing the recommendations from the STAG-TB 2020 meeting.

Ms Lana Syed provided an overview of key progress made by the CSTF since 2019, which included the launch of a joint statement (between the CSTF and the WHO Director-General) on accelerating action to end TB by reaching the UN high-level meeting targets.² As a selected member of the CSTF, Mr Chamreun Choub Sok joined the presentation to introduce the CSTF 2021–2022 workplan.

Because Session 1 was an information session, there were no STAG-TB recommendations; however, the update on progress made was welcomed by all members.

¹ <https://www.who.int/groups/strategic-and-technical-advisory-group-for-tuberculosis/about>.

² <https://www.who.int/tb/areas-of-work/community-engagement/JointStatementDGandTBcivilsocietytaskforce.pdf>.

2. Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on TB detection, disease burden and global targets (Session 2)

GTB focal points: Philippe Glaziou, Katherine Floyd

Discussants: Knut Lönnroth, Chikwe Ihekweazu

2.1 Background

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on TB detection and TB disease burden was one of the main items on the agenda of the 2020 STAG-TB meeting. This included discussion of modelling results, the importance of data that are closer to real time to monitor the impact of the pandemic on TB services and inform timely action, and the need for further modelling work.

Between November 2020 and June 2021, the GTB implemented various actions to build on and strengthen assessment of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on TB detection and TB disease burden. Actions included the following:

- Establishment of a global system for the collection of monthly and quarterly TB notification data from high TB burden and other regional priority countries, initially for 2020 and subsequently on an ongoing basis in 2021. This was done within GTB's existing online global TB data collection system.
- Analysis and dissemination of key results and messages in terms of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on TB detection, based on reported monthly and quarterly notification data. Key results and messages based on data for 84 countries were released and widely disseminated on 22 March 2021, in association with World TB Day. Subsequently, live visualizations of all reported data were made available online.
- Modelling work to estimate TB disease burden in 2020, informed by 2020 notification data. This was done through a collaboration with Imperial College London (United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland). It initially focused on 15 countries with the largest reported falls in TB notifications between 2019 and 2020, with a statistical model developed by GTB to extend estimates to other countries.
- Modelling work to develop projections of TB disease burden for 2021–2025, for selected countries. The initial focus was also on the 15 countries with the largest reported drops in TB notifications between 2019 and 2020, with a view to also using results to produce global estimates.

2.2 Topics covered

Topics covered in this session were:

- actions taken and progress made by GTB between November 2020 and June 2021 to assess the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on TB detection, TB disease burden and progress towards global TB targets;
- provisional results;
- proposed next steps; and
- feedback from STAG-TB members.

The next steps were defined as:

- ongoing peer-review of methods and results; for example, by members of the WHO Global Task Force on TB Impact Measurement, including those who are part of the TB Modelling and Analysis Consortium (TB MAC);
- circulation of burden estimates to all countries for review at the end of July 2021, with discussions held with countries as needed to review or refine the first round of burden estimates;

- publication of key results in the 2021 *Global TB report*;¹
- further work on projections for 2021 and beyond; and
- expansion of modelling work to include other countries in 2022.

2.3 Questions to STAG-TB

Two questions were posed to STAG-TB:

- What are STAG-TB's comments and advice on the work done to date?
- Does STAG-TB have any suggestions for revisions or additions needed to the next steps?

2.4 STAG-TB comments

STAG-TB:

- congratulates WHO for the impressive work done to assess the impact of COVID-19-related disruptions on TB detection, TB disease burden and progress towards global TB targets; and
- commends the agility shown in expanding the global TB data collection system to collect, analyse and report on monthly and quarterly TB case notification data and the steps taken to use modelling to estimate the burden of disease in 2020 and beyond.

2.5 STAG-TB recommendations

STAG-TB agreed with the next steps set out by GTB, and made the following additional recommendations:

- Publish the modelling methods used to assess the impact of COVID-19-related service disruptions on the TB burden in 2020 and beyond.
- Ensure there is clear communication about the implications of results and projections for the prospects of achieving global TB targets.
- Explore the feasibility of expanding the scope of the models used to date, to include other influences on the TB epidemic, such as the impact of the current severe economic crises and associated widening inequities, and other dimensions of morbidity (e.g. TB sequelae).
- Continue to support the rapid expansion of digital real-time systems for TB data collection and reporting.

¹ <https://www.who.int/teams/global-tuberculosis-programme/tb-reports/global-tuberculosis-report-2021>.

3. WHO solutions to mitigate and reverse the COVID-19 impact on TB: leadership (Session 3a)

GTB focal point: Monica Dias

Discussants: Ariel Pablos-Méndez, Ingrid Schoeman

3.1 Background

High-level commitments have galvanized progress towards ending TB; however, in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, there is a need for urgent and more ambitious investments and actions to achieve the commitments and meet the targets of the End TB Strategy. To ensure continuity of essential TB services during the COVID-19 pandemic, WHO and its leadership have been working intensely with countries, health workers, communities, civil society and other partners.

3.2 Topics covered

Topics covered in this session were:

- political dialogue and advocacy;
- multisectoral collaboration and engagement;
- research and innovation; and
- preparations for the 2023 UN high-level meeting on TB.

Key actions led and supported by WHO within the area of strategic leadership between November 2020 and June 2021 are highlighted below.

Political dialogue and advocacy

- High-level dialogue to urge action, accountability and investments by heads of state and government, including the promotion of the WHO Director-General Flagship initiative called FIND.TREAT.ALL#TB, together with the Stop TB Partnership and the Global Fund.
- Presidential or head of state End TB initiatives for the engagement and accountability of stakeholders, and national campaigns to drive progress such as the “Races to End TB”.
- Several high-level events (e.g. on World TB Day in March 2021 and on the sidelines of the World Health Assembly in May 2021).

Multisectoral collaboration and engagement

- Implementation of WHO’s Multisectoral Accountability Framework on TB (MAF-TB), including the rollout of baseline assessment checklists to support adaptation and use at country level

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