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# Niti Aayog panel on nutrition has conflict of interest: Activists

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NEW DELHI: Several public health and nutrition advocates and paediatricians have written to the Niti Aayog vice chairman regarding the conflict of interest of nongovernmental officials in the Aayog's newly-constituted working group on nutrition.

They pointed out that members included food company lobbyists, people on the boards of multinational food companies and founders of startups selling nutritional supplements. They expressed concern over non-availability of information about how these members were selected.

The letter referred to Niti Aayog's own National Nutrition Strategy (NNS) guiding principles on ensuring that there was no conflict of interest. The NNS guiding principles state: "An underlying principle of action is that policy development and programme implementation must be transparent, open to public scrutiny and kept free from conflict of interest, with requisite safeguards. (This includes ensuring that representation on policy, technical advisory groups and various management committees at different levels is free from conflict of interest.)" Niti Aayog's office memorandum dated September 26 stated that it proposed to "reach for fresh ideas for New India by 2022 on improving the nutrition sector". It also sought inputs on monitoring, effectively implementing and scaling up existing government schemes in the nutrition sector. The memorandum listed 22 members in the working group with Dr Vinod Paul, formerly of AIIMS Delhi, as the chairperson. The memorandum had no details of who selected the members or by what criteria.

The public health advocates pointed out that the expert group included representative of International Life Sciences Institute (ILSI). "It is a lobbying arm of the food industry globally. ILSI's member trustees include Nestle, Hindustan Lever, Abbott Healthcare, Mars, Ajinomoto and Mondelez Foods," they added.

Including such parties or individuals in the working group would "negatively influence the policy programme decisions taken" and "may hamper public interest," stated the letter.

Leading government institutions which have done extensive work on nutrition policy, including the Central Food Technological Research Institute in Mysore, AIIMS Delhi, Indian Academy of Paediatrician's nutrition chapter and MS University of Baroda are not represented on the working group. Dr Paul did not respond to TOI's queries on the issue.

Those from the government in the working group include Alok Kumar, adviser on nutrition in the Aayog, Dr Rajesh Kumar, joint secretary from the women and child development ministry, Dr Soumya Swaminathan of ICMR (recently appointed WHO deputy director general), Pawan Agarwal of Food Safety and Standards Authority of India and Dr T Longwah, director of the National Institute of Nutrition.