BACKGROUND

The VARG, formed in 2013 by AVAC, is an independent, advocate-led, global team of HIV prevention advocates that acts as a liaison between HIV vaccine researchers and a range of communities. As the HIV vaccine field is highly technical and science-driven, there is a need for advocacy to track and maintain support for its activities. Country-level advocates can play a unique role in liaising with ongoing trials and linking vaccine research to national HIV prevention agendas.

OBJECTIVES

In 2016, the VARG established its strategic plan, identifying the following objectives.

**Objective 1**
Build the capacity of stakeholders involved in HIV vaccine research

**Objective 2**
Strengthening accountability of the HIV vaccine trial sector

**Objective 3**
Strengthen and sustain global and national HIV vaccine advocacy mainstreamed in the HIV prevention agenda

RESULTS

As of 2018, the VARG has increased its voice to amplify interests of civil society vis-à-vis HIV vaccine research. The VARG has formulated advocacy points, including:

1. Transparency and managing expectations around ongoing efficacy trials
2. Standard of care in efficacy trials including linkage of PrEP provision in trials to national rollout,
3. Prioritization of vaccine candidates with respect to potential flat or decreased research funding.

The VARG has identified key challenges of

1. Difficulty in interrogating research entities as an independently affiliated group
2. Maintaining high research literacy and knowledge of the field to inform advocacy.

CONCLUSIONS

Given the history and breadth of the HIV vaccine research field – as well as its urgency – developing a robust mechanism for civil society engagement has been a challenge. Advocacy groups like the VARG are invested in working with researchers to identify community-centric priorities to help guide vaccine research agendas, to ensure ongoing support for vaccine research from policy makers and funders, and to hold researchers accountable to the conduct of ethical, community-centric HIV vaccine trials.