

European Union refuses vaccine patent waiver but agrees mRNA transfer technology scheme as a sop to Africa

Jean Shaoul**22 February 2022**

The European Union (EU) has given its approval to the World Health Organization (WHO)'s scheme to enable six African countries, Egypt, Kenya, Nigeria, Senegal, South Africa and Tunisia, to access the technology needed to produce mRNA vaccines. Africa has thus far been almost entirely reliant on imported COVID-19 vaccines.

The decision comes after Pfizer/BioNTech and Moderna, whose mRNA COVID vaccines were funded by the German and US governments, had denied a request from the WHO to share their technology and expertise. Apart from AstraZeneca, the major pharmaceutical corporations have refused to let other countries produce their vaccines, instead signing a few deals to allow them to bottle and package doses, citing quality concerns and the time required to get new companies up to speed.

The EU, Switzerland and the United Kingdom have refused to agree to India and South Africa's proposal, backed by more than 100 nations, researchers, campaign groups, businesses and media outlets, that the World Trade Organization (WTO) waive intellectual-property rights for COVID-19 vaccines and treatments during the pandemic. While the US Biden administration declared it was in favour of such a waiver, this was for public relations purposes only as it has done nothing to force US companies to comply.

Rejecting a coordinated global response to the pandemic, capitalist governments globally have put profits before lives in support of their own corporations and banks' interests, condemning the world's poorest countries to ever greater poverty and hardship.

More than a year after vaccines became available, just 12 percent of the African population, 168 million of a 1.3 billion population, have been fully vaccinated, with 80 percent of the population yet to receive a single shot. About six million people are being vaccinated in Africa every week. This needs to increase sixfold to around 36 million if the continent is to reach the target of vaccinating 70 percent of the population of every country by the middle of 2022. So

far, only Mauritius and Seychelles have met the 70 percent target.

The disparity in vaccine access is obscene. While 116 countries around the world are nowhere near meeting their 70 percent target and COVAX, the WHO initiative that provides most of the vaccines for low and middle-income countries, is running out of money, 75 percent of the population in the EU and the US have been vaccinated.

At last week's fractious meeting of the African Union and the EU in Brussels, African leaders and public health officials accused rich countries of monopolising the vast majority of the global supply of vaccines by paying far more than poorer countries could ever afford, hoarding doses and donating vaccines close to their expiry date, making "a mockery of vaccine equity" Although several African countries have the know-how and facilities to manufacture vaccines, vaccine nationalism and profit gouging have left the continent 99 percent dependent on imports—to the extent that any doses are available for purchase—and donations.

The purpose of the WHO's technology transfer project, launched last June in Cape Town, is to enable poorer countries to access the mRNA technology, which works by delivering genetic molecules containing the code for key parts of a pathogen into human cells, thereby provoking an immune response. This would supposedly enable their mass production of mRNA vaccines and end their reliance on Big Pharma's profit-maximising schemes. More than 70 percent of mRNA shots from Moderna and Pfizer/BioNTech have gone to rich countries.

As WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said during the launch ceremony hosted by the European Council, France, South Africa and the WHO, "No other event like the COVID-19 pandemic has shown that reliance on a few companies to supply global public goods is limiting, and dangerous."

Although the mRNA technology transfer hub has been set up to manufacture COVID-19 vaccines, it will have the

potential to produce other vaccines and products, including insulin to treat diabetes, cancer medicines and, potentially, vaccines for diseases such as malaria, tuberculosis and HIV. Nevertheless, while training is set to begin next month, this is unlikely to have a major impact for quite some time.

The announcement comes days after Afrigen, a South African company that is part of the WHO's mRNA hub, revealed it had developed, in collaboration with Johannesburg's University of the Witwatersrand, its own version of an mRNA vaccine based on publicly available data for the Moderna vaccine. Their success exposes the self-serving claims of Pfizer, BioNTech and Moderna that Africa lacked the necessary expertise to manufacture their vaccines.

Afrigen plans to scale up production towards commercial scale and set up clinical trials later this year. It chose the Moderna vaccine because much of its sequencing is in the public domain—the cost of its research and clinical trials were largely financed by \$2.5 billion of funding from the US government—and because the company has pledged not to enforce patents during the pandemic. Although, with most of the advanced countries declaring the pandemic over, that may not have much longevity.

South Africa's President Cyril Ramaphosa called on the global vaccine distribution scheme COVAX and vaccines alliance Gavi to commit to buying vaccines from local manufacturing hubs.

The EU is anxious for its own geostrategic reasons to be seen to be supporting Africa's vaccination programme at a time when its relations with Africa are strained.

France has announced it will pull its troops out of Mali in the face of huge popular opposition to French imperialism after Bamako's military government hired Russian mercenaries and expelled the French ambassador. The military in Mali, Burkina Faso and Guinea have toppled French-aligned governments as ISIS-aligned and other jihadist groups have gained ground across the Sahel and central Africa.

Furthermore, African leaders view Europe's green agenda as a means of blocking potentially lucrative oil and gas projects billed as bringing electricity to 600 million Africans.

The EU's move comes at a time of growing competition for influence in Africa. Trade with China has risen over the last 20 years to reach \$176 billion in 2020, while trade between the EU and Africa has stagnated at around €225 billion.

Last November, Chinese President Xi Jinping announced at the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation summit that Beijing would commit an additional 1 billion vaccines to Africa in 2022—more than the EU's global vaccine-sharing commitment. China, he said, would also share 25 percent of

its allocation of International Monetary Fund special drawing rights (SDRs) with Africa after Senegalese President Macky Sall made a request just days earlier. European leaders called last May for countries to redirect \$100 billion in SDRs to Africa but have so far delivered little.

The EU signed off on the WHO's technology transfer hub scheme as a cheap compromise at the EU-AU summit in Brussels, with the European Commission, Germany, France and Belgium agreeing to cough up a miserly €40 million for the technology hub to allow African countries to increase their manufacturing capacity and eventually produce mRNA jabs on a commercial scale.

The EU also pledged to continue donating vaccines to Africa—at a snail's pace. Having thus far delivered just 148 million doses, 22 percent of the doses it pledged to vulnerable countries, the bloc intends to reach 450 million by the summer, still less than the 750 million pledged.

At the same time, BioNTech announced plans to deliver factory facilities built out of shipping containers to several African countries to enable the production of the Pfizer vaccine on the continent. While this may eventually make it easier for African countries to obtain the Pfizer vaccine, BioNTech will not be sharing its technological knowhow. The company has also signed a fill and finish deal—the final stages of production, with the drug itself coming from Europe—with Biovac. It has announced it will build manufacturing plants in Rwanda and Senegal.

Similarly, Moderna, under pressure to produce vaccines in lower-income countries, has announced plans to spend \$500 million building mRNA vaccine factories in Africa, but few details are available.

French President Emmanuel Macron said that supporting African health sovereignty was one of the key goals of starting up local production, “to empower regions and countries to fend for themselves, during crises, and in peacetime.”

Be that as it may, there is no intention for that goal to be realized any time soon, as European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen admitted. “Today, of all the vaccines administered in Africa, one percent is produced in Africa—of all the vaccines. And rightly so, the goal is *in 2040* to have reached a level of 60 percent of vaccines produced in Africa, that are administered in Africa [emphasis added].”



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