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GETTING AFRICA VACCINE READY

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By **Dr. Babatunde Omilola**

The COVID-19 pandemic has ushered in many record setting “firsts” in global health including, the astonishing development of a vaccine in less than 9 months. In these unprecedented times, the global community has shown remarkable commitment towards ending this devastating pandemic. In the coming months, we are poised to achieve yet another global first - the wide scale rollout of COVID-19 vaccines to people all around the world (not just wealthy countries) at roughly the same time. For Africa, this means preparing to deliver the largest immunization drive in the continent’s history.

Globally, the total number of confirmed COVID-19 cases since the start of the pandemic reached 111,351,199 and the number of global deaths reached 2,466,155 as of 21 February 2021. The African continent, home to nearly 20% of the world’s population, has recorded 3,829,402 COVID-19 cases and a total of 101,336 deaths as of 21 February 2021¹. This implies that Africa accounted for 3.4% of the total global cases and 4.1% of global deaths as of 21 February 2021. The World Health Organization (WHO) noted in early January 2021 that the pandemic is spreading rapidly across Africa, with recorded cases surging by about 19 percent (up to 30,000 daily new cases) in the first week of January – the



second-highest rate of transmission for a region of the world behind that of North America.

This grim setting is coupled with some of the worst projections of severe economic downfalls not seen across the continent in the last 25 years. Estimates report that the

African economy contracted by 2.7% in 2020, a significant drop compared to the growth of 3.3% in 2019². Furthermore, the increased government expenditure driven mainly in response to the pandemic, will drive up the fiscal deficit to 8.6% of GDP, a significant rise when compared to the 4.7% recorded in 2019.

The exciting development of several vaccines is a welcome breath of fresh air and the light at the end of the tunnel that the world has been waiting for. Not only is mass vaccination the only effective means to halt the pandemic in its tracks and save thousands of lives, but for Africa this will mean that the economy could potential rise by 2.7% contingent on widespread uptake of the COVID-19 vaccine throughout 2021³.

To date, up to 6 primary vaccine candidates have been developed and approved by various regulatory bodies for market entry. Nearly 10 billion vaccine doses are estimated to have already been secured by governments, with high income countries securing 35% of these doses and Middle Income Countries (MICs) securing over 25%⁴. As of 21 February 2021, 204,156,990 COVID-19 vaccinations have been administered globally with the United States of America accounting for 30.5% of the vaccinations administered to date. Only seven countries in Africa (Algeria, Egypt, Guinea, Mauritius, Morocco, Seychelles and South Africa) have reported rolling out COVID-19 vaccinations to date. As of February 21, 2021,



2,538,019 vaccinations have been administered in Africa, which represents just 1.2% of total global vaccinations⁵. The pace of securing vaccines in Africa is significantly slower and the continent at large is lagging in securing adequate volumes of vaccines sufficient to support the mass immunization programs anticipated in the coming years.

Many initiatives have stepped in to attempt to ensure against the detrimental effects of such a



1 Weekly data flash on Covid-19 in Africa, AfDB Statistics Department, 21 February 2021
 2 AfDB, African Economic Outlook, 2020 – Supplement (Amid COVID-19)

3 World Bank, Press Release. Available from: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/pressrelease/2021/01/05/global-economy-to-expand-by-4-percent-in-2021-vaccine-deployment-and-investment-keyto-sustaining-the-recovery>
 4 Duke University Launch and Scale Speedometer, 2020
 5 Weekly data flash on COVID-19 in Africa, AfDB Statistics Department, 21 February 2021



from the COVAX facility. Furthermore, the African Vaccine Acquisition Task Team (AVATT) under the auspices of the African Union recently concluded agreements with some vaccine manufacturers to secure 670 million of different COVID-19 vaccine doses for African countries in addition to the COVAX program.

However, a key challenge remains, that is to ensure that countries can readily absorb the vaccine commitments and rollout effective immunisation programs to protect populations against the scourge of the virus. The indication so far is that many countries are not ready as concluded in a recent WHO report which indicated **an average score of 43% readiness for COVID-19 vaccine roll-out in Africa - well-below the 80% threshold target⁶**. In light of this, the WHO further estimates that just 3.3% of the populations of low-income countries in Africa will be vaccinated by the end of June 2021 and that populations in Africa will remain largely unvaccinated until 2023.

Now more than ever, it is paramount that African countries initiate more aggressive and robust strategies to effectively contain the pandemic. To achieve the goal of vaccinating 60% of the population on the continent required to attain 'herd immunity', African countries need to rapidly address lagging areas and establish systems for rolling-out rapid and efficient vaccination campaigns. The following are highlighted as critical areas for immediate action:

lag for the continent. A large global collaborative through the COVID-19 Vaccines Global Access ("COVAX") facility, spearheaded by the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunization ("GAVI"), is positioned to avail at least 2 billion doses of COVID-19 vaccines by the end of 2021, including at least 1.3 billion donor-funded doses to 92 low-income countries. In this regard, Ghana received 600,000 COVID-19 vaccine doses from the COVAX facility on 24 February 2021, becoming the first African country to receive vaccine doses



therefore encouraged to leverage innovative financing mechanisms such as Results Based Financing (RBF) as a potential source for supporting vaccine rollout strategies. In October 2020, the World Bank approved US\$12 billion to support COVID-19 vaccines purchase, deployment and related health systems strengthening. Similarly, the Afreximbank has announced advance procurement commitment guarantees of up to USD\$2 billion to vaccine manufacturers on behalf of its member countries. Member countries are then expected to pay using their internal resources or access an instalment payment facility of Afreximbank for up to five years.

- **REMOVE BARRIERS TO VACCINE REGULATION AND APPROVAL**

Governments should work with their regulatory bodies to ensure expedited vaccine registration and approval processes. The poor capacity of regulatory bodies has resulted in severe lag times across many countries on the continent. Effective solutions that allow for fast-track routes in the filing and approval processes of safe vaccines should be put in place. Additionally, governments can institute mutual recognition of approval across borders or regional blocs as it is done in the European Union (EU), so that inspection findings can be shared readily and easily to ensure an expedited rollout process.

- **COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IS AT THE**

- **RESOURCE MOBILISATION**

African countries need to prioritise resource allocation towards funding vaccine procurement and deployment. While the global community has rallied to develop the COVAX facility amongst other global market interventions to avail vaccines at a low cost, efforts will still be required by individual governments to mobilize additional resources to fill funding gaps. Countries are



⁶ WHO - Press Release, WHO urges African countries to ramp up readiness for COVID-19 vaccination drive, November 2020. Available from: <https://www.afro.who.int/news/who-urges-african-countries-ramp-readiness-covid-19-vaccination-drive>

HEART OF A SUCCESSFUL ROLLOUT

Lessons from polio and Ebola containment efforts have taught us that accelerated access to new technologies must also be accompanied by efforts to ensure public trust and cooperation. In today's era where information is easily accessible at the tap of a finger, greater efforts are required to fight against the scourge of misinformation and "fake news" that could be a major deterrent to vaccine adoption and uptake. Governments are urged to put in place effect communication strategies that do not only address misinformation, but ensure that communities are engaged at the lowest level with the most accurate and robust information on COVID-19 vaccines. It will be crucial for governments to ensure that communication materials address the population's concerns and more importantly gives them a voice in the process.

● OPTIMIZE HUMAN RESOURCES FOR HEALTH

In anticipation for delivering of large scale COVID-19 vaccinations in Africa, governments and their development partners should support training and capacity building of healthcare workers at all levels. This may sound like a given, but such an endeavour should by no means be taken for granted. As it is, losses to personnel either as a result of death from COVID-19, self-imposed isolations or mass emigration have left many health systems in need of human resources that were already strained to begin with. Equipping and retaining health workforce



should be a high priority for governments. Personal protective gears should be availed for all healthcare workers. Furthermore, healthcare workers should be well-trained and equipped to manage the huge pressure and workload that will come with mass immunization and information dissemination.

● REINFORCE LOGISTICS AND SUPPLY CHAIN MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS

The success of the upcoming mass immunization drive in Africa hinges heavily on the logistics and supply chain infrastructure in countries. Critical

investments in the establishment of cold chain facilities spanning the entire supply chain, from shipment to delivery, will be critical because a bulk of the vaccines to be deployed can only be stored at sub-zero temperatures. In addition to ensuring that the vaccines remain viable, robust tools and systems for monitoring stocks will need to be developed and/or optimized to mitigate against detrimental stock outs and shortages upon reaching scale. Failure to establish the strong logistic and supply chain systems required may result in huge losses financially and may render all other efforts to prepare for wide scale vaccination across countries null and void.

Thinking ahead, this pandemic has reawakened the spirit in support of establishing and expanding vaccine manufacturing capacity on the continent. Various African governments have since expressed their interest in building up Africa's vaccine manufacturing capabilities including the Nigerian Government which has recently announced plans to set up a vaccine production company in Nigeria to boost local COVID-19 vaccine production. The market for vaccines in Africa is expected to grow substantially in the next decade from approximately US\$3.7 billion to US\$4.6 billion. This presents a very exciting opportunity for the development of the pharmaceutical sector on the continent.

To conclude, African countries can and will overcome the COVID-19 pandemic. At the center of all of this will be exemplary leadership and commitment to ending the immense suffering that has been caused by the pandemic.



Although African countries are lagging behind developed economies in terms of their access to COVID-19 vaccinations, it is important to use the added time to learn from the experiences of other nations and adopt more rapid and efficient vaccination programs. Governments should now more than ever - amplify their efforts, leverage every resource at their disposal, and develop capacities for an African vaccine production in order to ensure the continent's sovereignty and ability to take timely action in future public health shocks.



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