

African Union seeks to boost vaccine-making with five new centers



Current AU president Felix Tshisekedi said sufficient funds would be required for the project [File: Sunday Alamba/AP]

Cairo, April 15 (RHC)-- The African Union (AU) has announced the launch of a partnership to manufacture vaccines at five research centres to be built on the continent within the next 15 years.

The Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations (CEPI), which helps run the global COVAX coronavirus vaccine-sharing programme with the public-private alliance Gavi and the World Health Organization (WHO), signed a memorandum of understanding to boost African vaccine research and development as well as manufacturing.

The five centers will be located in the north, south, east, west and centre of Africa over the next 10-15 years, according to John Nkengasong, director of the Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), an AU agency.

“Trusted partnership will be critical in advancing the vaccine manufacturing agenda on the continent,” he said on Tuesday after a two-day virtual meeting. “The partnership with CEPI symbolises cooperation and collaboration to help respond to infectious disease threats and ensure Africa’s health security.”

The target is to produce locally within 20 years 60 percent of all vaccines used on the continent – compared with one percent today. “We are aware that it is a challenge,” said Nkengasong, but added: “If Africa does not plan to address its vaccine security needs today, then we are absolutely setting ourselves for failure.”

According to WHO, Africa sits on the “sidelines” of the vaccination drive against COVID-19, with only two percent of the world’s total vaccines administered on the continent. Richard Hatchett, chief executive of CEPI, said: “Together we can strengthen Africa’s capacity to prevent, detect and respond to emerging and re-emerging infectious threats.

“By building regional resilience and strengthening health security on the continent we can mitigate the disproportionate health and economic impacts that epidemic infectious diseases can have on populations in low and middle-income countries.”

Current AU chair Felix Tshisekedi said “sufficient funds will be required, legislative harmonisation in Africa and incentives” as he called on the members of the diaspora worldwide “to help strengthen the medicine and vaccine production capacities in Africa.”

The project “will not just fight against COVID-19 but see the establishment of vaccine production for known illnesses and prepare for future epidemics and pandemics,” said Tshisekedi, who is also the president of the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Africa has so far been the least-affected continent by the pandemic, with 4.3 million cases recorded, including 114,000 deaths in an overall population of 1.2 billion, according to WHO figures.

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