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New Initiative Aims To Drive Local COVID-19 Vaccine Production in Latin America

by Francesca Bruce

Pharmaceutical companies have been invited to take part in technology transfer for vaccines.

The Pan American Health Organization hopes a new initiative to increase local production of COVID-19 vaccines in Latin America will help drive the region's pandemic response and reduce dependence on a "highly concentrated global vaccine market."

Latin America has been hit hard by the COVID-19 pandemic and so far, only around 23% of the population has been fully vaccinated. The vaccination rate falls to single digits in some countries, according to PAHO.

"Limited global production and unequal distribution of vaccines in the face of staggering demand hinder our COVID response. Mass vaccination is critical if we are to stem the tide of this pandemic and hinder the spread of further variants," PAHO director Carissa Etienne said at the launch of the Regional Platform to Advance the Manufacturing of COVID-19 Vaccines and other Health Technologies in the Americas on 1 September.

The new platform will support collaboration across countries and agencies to enlist partners from private and public sectors to increase local vaccine manufacturing. It will also promote research and incentivize the development and manufacture of vaccines.

The first concrete step of the initiative is to facilitate technology transfer processes to ensure regional ability to manufacture mRNA vaccines against COVID-19, said Etienne. PAHO has already invited companies to put forward submissions of interest for taking part in technology transfer. It has received submissions from 32 private and public companies. These are currently being analyzed and the results will be made available at the end of September, she added.

Etienne emphasized that the initiative is not a short-term response but part of a long-term and

sustainable strategy to reduce dependence on imported medicines, vaccines and medical technologies so that the region can better respond to future situations and improve access.

“The goal is to take advantage of existing production capacities that could contribute to manufacture mRNA vaccines in the Americas. The principle is that manufacture should benefit the entire region, with regional pharmaceutical production and distribution of the vaccines by PAHO’s Revolving Fund to all countries,” says PAHO. The Revolving Fund allows PAHO member states to combine their purchasing power to buy high-quality vaccines and related products at lower prices.

In addition, PAHO will use the Revolving Fund to pool demand from across the region to secure more vaccines to complement what countries have already secured through bilateral agreements, donations and through the international COVAX initiative. So far, 24 countries have requested vaccines through the fund.

Etienne added that PAHO is also trying to raise awareness among developed countries about low vaccination rates in the region and the need for more donations. “Donations are best alternative to fill critical gap in deployment that COVAX is still facing,” she said.

The region has been badly impacted by the pandemic for two main reasons. Public health policies, such as social distancing or stay at home orders, have been difficult to implement because of socio-economic determinates such as over-crowded housing and strong social networks that often take the place of more formal health and care infrastructure. Meanwhile, poor levels of vaccination mean that there has been little impact on reducing mortality rates.