

WTO

COVID-19 Vaccine Supply Chain and Regulatory Transparency

Opening session

29 June 2021

Good morning, good afternoon and good evening.

The COVID-19 pandemic has reminded us with staggering force what happens when essential health products are not sufficiently available and equitably distributed.

We are living through the harsh reality of extreme inequity in access to vaccines, where there are countries with more than 70% vaccine coverage, while in many low-income countries vaccine coverage can be as low as 1.5%.

For some of us, it is a *deja-vu*. The response to HIV should have been a lesson learned – it took more than 10 years for effective treatments to reach LMIC – one of the reasons used for this delay at the time was that HIC were concerned about the lack of “absorptive capacity” in these countries - similar to what we are beginning to hear during this pandemic.

This is a very controversial issue – “absorptive capacity” should not keep countries last in line. And should not delay actions to address urgently the coverage gap between HIC and LMIC.

In the HIV field, this delay costed tens of millions of lives. But as it was a chronic infection, these deaths were spread across the years... And the generic industry played a big role in helping expand HIV treatment.

This SARS COV-2 pandemic brings a very different context - we have a highly transmissible respiratory virus and one that besides the pressure in health systems, has also an enormous economic impact, affecting the lives of individuals and entire societies.

And Science tell us that there are variants of concern that are more transmissible and that could have negative effects in the immunogenicity of vaccines, so we have no time to lose in increasing vaccine coverage to more equitable levels in all countries.

Just a few weeks ago, the World Health Assembly adopted a landmark resolution on strengthening local production of medicines and other health technologies. Strengthening of regulatory systems goes hand in hand with increasing manufacturing capacity– good news is that there are already many vaccine producers with PQ products in LMIC.

Voluntary licensing and sharing of know-how and knowledge is also being championed by WHO together with 43 countries – the C-TAP initiative.

And you are aware that WHO issued a call for Expressions of Interest to establish technology transfer hubs for COVID-19 mRNA vaccines - we received more than 50 proposals, about half of which were from companies or institutions interested in receiving technology, and half were interested in providing the technology, or acting as the training hub, or both.

I must say that the active engagement of WTO in pushing for greater access to COVID-19 products is very welcome by WHO, as is the organization of this technical symposium on “ Vaccine Supply Chain and Regulatory Transparency”.

To close - we must ensure that the information shared during this symposium can result in actionable and achievable contributions from industry and governments alike. WHO stands ready to support the collaboration with our partners.

Thank you.

Mariângela Simão