

Statement by Dr. Sidney Wong, Director of the MSF Access Campaign at the joint hearing of the Committee on Environment, Public Health and Food Safety (ENVI) and the Committee on Industry, Research and Energy (ITRE) on "How to secure access to COVID-19 vaccines for EU citizens: clinical trials, production and distribution challenges", European Parliament, Brussels, Belgium, 22 September 2020- 09 AM-12PM

Thank you to the European Parliament for inviting Médecins Sans Frontières to this hearing on access to COVID-19 vaccines. I am representing MSF in my capacity as the Executive Co-Director of the MSF Access Campaign. As an independent, international medical humanitarian organisation, MSF has and continues to support the response to the COVID-19 pandemic in over 60 countries.

Whilst the focus of this hearing is to examine the developments and challenges to ensure access to COVID-19 vaccines in Europe, in these unprecedented times, controlling the COVID-19 pandemic requires global action and solidarity. In addition to protecting their own populations, Governments need to unite behind and abide by a truly globalised response, instead of only inward-oriented national strategies that will harm rather than benefit all countries.

Right now, we are very concerned that this truly globalised response is far from being realised, and fair and equitable access to safe and effective COVID-19 vaccines globally will not be guaranteed. And as companies and governments rush to get the first vaccines developed, we highlight the need for greater responsibility to ensure that regulatory approval is based on clear demonstration of safety and efficacy of these new medical tools.

We welcome that the EU has stated its firm commitment to the global COVID-19 response, and its support to the WHO's Access to COVID-19 Tools ACT Accelerator and COVAX facility for global vaccines access. To this end, the EU has announced a €230 million loan by the European Investment Bank for the purchase of 88 million vaccines for the 92 world's poorest countries. While 88 million doses is an important contribution, in reality this will cover less than 1.5% of the populations in those 92 low- and middle-income countries. In contrast, EU member states are aiming at a vaccination coverage of 30% or more of their populations, with a €3 billion investment into research and development of COVID-19 vaccines and signing advanced purchase agreements to secure the very first batches of vaccine doses.

As initial vaccine supplies will be limited, such agreements undermine global solidarity and call into question the political declarations made by Heads of States at the start of this pandemic and at the launch of the ACT Accelerator, which was stewarded by the European Commission.

In order to address the growing disparity in global access to COVID-19 vaccines, we strongly call for the EU and its member states to take the following six actions:

1. First, the EU and its member states should adhere to the WHO fair access and equitable allocation mechanism for COVID-19 vaccines. During this time of scarcity, this framework, based on public health needs and benefits, would ensure all countries have access to a share of the vaccines as soon as they are available.

2. Second, the availability of vaccines for frontline health care workers and social care settings in all countries is a matter of utmost urgency. We count on the EU, and other regions, to make sufficient vaccines available to cover the WHO-estimated global population of frontline healthcare workers, by committing to share a portion of the vaccines they obtain through advanced purchase agreements with the COVAX AMC starting from the very first vaccine shipment.
3. Third, as supply will eventually increase, proportional shares of vaccines should be made available for populations in crisis-affected humanitarian settings: refugees, asylum seekers, marginalised populations, and people living in conflict areas. These are populations who have the least access to, or are excluded altogether from, national health services. The EU must contribute doses towards the development of a humanitarian stockpile to meet their needs.
4. Fourth, the EU needs to increase its financial and political support to ensure the COVAX AMC truly delivers in providing sufficient effective and safe vaccines for the 92 poorest countries in the world. Failing to make COVAX AMC fully functional will be a failure of the global pandemic response.
5. Fifth, the EU must support a real global increase in production of COVID-19 vaccines through non-exclusive licensing. More than 30 Members of the European Parliament have called for non-exclusive licensing as a condition for EU funding for COVID-19 R&D, in order to reduce the dependency on pharmaceutical corporations. EU funding and investments should ensure open access to and the right to use all technologies, know-how, materials, regulatory data, and intellectual property related to all COVID-19 vaccine candidates by manufacturers in all countries. Transparent technology transfer agreements to producers in regions around the world should be facilitated.
6. Finally, full transparency must be required from the corporations to disclose the costs of R&D and production, prices in all countries, intellectual property status, and licensing and technology transfer agreements. A responsibility rests on this parliament to ensure that all funding, advance purchase agreements, and contracts are publicly available. Commercial secrecy and privilege should not stand in the way of responding to this global health crisis.

Thank you.