

Germany's BioNTech to build Africa vaccine plant from 2022

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Germany's BioNTech, which developed a coronavirus jab with US pharmaceutical giant Pfizer, said Tuesday it aims to begin building a vaccine plant in Africa next year.

The project is expected to address the continent's shortage of COVID-19 vaccines and boost its flagging vaccination drive, with only 5.2 percent of its population fully inoculated, according to the Africa CDC.

BioNTech said it was working with authorities in both Rwanda and Senegal and planned to begin construction "in mid-2022".

The firm "will help in constructing the site for manufacturing and will also provide assistance in capacity building and knowing sharing," Rwanda's Health Minister Daniel Ngamije said, as he signed the deal in Kigali.

The facility will be located in the capital's Special Economic Zone, he added.

The plant will initially have capacity to produce around 50 million vaccine doses per year, the German company said.

BioNTech had in August announced plans to build "sustainable vaccine production capabilities" in Rwanda and Senegal, producing not only COVID-19 vaccines but also mRNA-based malaria and tuberculosis vaccines.

"We will work together to build a regional production network to support access to African-produced vaccines for Africa," BioNTech co-founder Ugur Sahin said on Tuesday.

The announcement comes as pharmaceutical firms face increasing pressure to lift patents on their COVID-19 vaccines to help produce doses in regions which are still experiencing shortages.

But there is fierce resistance from big pharma and their host countries, which insist patents are not the main roadblocks to scaling up production and warn the move could hamper innovation.

In July, Pfizer and BioNTech announced that they were partnering with the Biovac Group to bottle their COVID-19 vaccine in Cape Town, South Africa, beginning in 2022.

However, the creation of the messenger RNA—the most delicate and crucial step—will continue to be carried out in Europe.

Currently, just one percent of vaccines used in Africa are manufactured on the continent. The African Union wants to increase this proportion to 60 percent by 2040.

US pharmaceutical giant Moderna earlier this month also announced plans to build a vaccine plant in Africa.

Africa, home to 1.2 billion people, is the least vaccinated continent in the world.

The problem has exposed Africa's huge dependence on imported vaccines and its technology gaps compared with Europe, China and the United States.

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