

# Gates Foundation funding \$40 million effort to help develop mRNA vaccines in Africa in coming years

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Bill Gates speaks to The Associated Press during a visit of the Institut Pasteur in dakar, Senegal, Sunday, Oct. 8, 2023. A \$40 million investment will help several African manufacturers produce new messenger RNA vaccines on the continent where people were last in line to receive jabs during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation announced Monday, Oct. 9, 2023. Credit: AP Photo

A \$40 million investment will help several African manufacturers produce new messenger RNA vaccines on the continent where people were last in line to receive jabs during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation announced Monday.

While it could still take at least three more years before any of the vaccines are approved and on the market, the foundation said that its mRNA investment marks an important step forward in improving vaccine equity.

"Whether it's for local diseases in Africa like Rift Valley (fever) or for global diseases like TB, mRNA looks like a very promising approach," Bill Gates told The Associated Press on Sunday after visiting one of the facilities involved, the Institut Pasteur in Dakar, Senegal. "And so it allows us to bring in lots of African capabilities to work on these vaccines, and then this can be scaled up."

The announcement comes as the foundation opens its annual three-day Grand Challenges event, which brings together scientists and public health researchers from around the world.

Institut Pasteur, along with the South Africa-based company Biovac, will be using an mRNA research and manufacturing platform that was developed by Quantoom Biosciences in Belgium. The two Africa-based vaccine manufacturers are receiving \$5 million each in funding from the foundation, while another \$10 million is earmarked for other companies that have not yet been named. The remaining \$20 million is going to Quantoom "to further advance the technology and lower costs."

The mRNA vaccine technology came to the forefront with the production of COVID-19 vaccines made by Pfizer and Moderna. [The](#)

[messenger RNA approach starts with a snippet](#) of genetic code-carrying instructions for making proteins. And by picking the right virus protein to target, the body turns into a mini vaccine factory.

Those COVID-19 mRNA vaccines were fast-tracked through the regulatory process and granted emergency use authorization. The new vaccines under development in Africa face a far longer development timeline—anywhere from three to seven years.

Dr. Amadou Sall, chief executive officer at Institut Pasteur, said the deal will help build vaccine self-reliance in Africa. The institute already has been producing yellow fever jabs since the 1930s and now hopes mRNA technology can be harnessed to produce vaccines for diseases endemic on the continent like Lassa fever, Rift Valley fever and Crimean-Congo hemorrhagic fever.

"What we want is next time there is a pandemic—we hope it won't happen soon—Africa would be able to make its own vaccine, to contribute to the development, and make sure that we protect the population," Sall said. "What happened with COVID should never happen again in the sense that Africans should get vaccinated as a matter of equity."

Jose Castillo, chief executive officer of Quantom Biosciences, said the mRNA technologies allow low- and middle-income countries "to become autonomous in terms of research and development." The platform only needs 350 square meters (3,800 square feet) of space to have a manufacturing facility capable of making tens of millions of doses.

"So we think that this technology will have a tremendous impact in terms of autonomy through regional manufacturing," he said.

With \$8.3 billion to give away in 2023, the Gates Foundation is the largest private philanthropic donor. And with an endowment of more than \$70 billion, its spending power is likely to continue for many decades. It has spent billions of dollars to vaccinate against polio, treat and prevent malaria and HIV and more recently advance vaccines for diseases like cholera.

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