

# There may be a Covid-19 vaccine, but what about Africa?

By [Zuneid Yousuf](#)

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The recent announcements by global pharmaceutical companies that their Covid-19 vaccines have shown over 90% effectiveness is undoubtedly triumphant news. Even with several hurdles to overcome, it looks as though the world will have its first authorised, safe, and effective vaccine in a matter of weeks.



Zuneid Yousuf, CEO, African Green Resources

However, for those of us across the African continent who have watched on as Western countries have ordered tens of millions of doses, as well as doses of several other vaccines that are just a short distance away from being ready to go, it has left us questioning whether Africans will have equal and timely access to these life-saving vaccines?

The unfortunate reality is that poorer countries will only get access to the vaccine after the wealthier nations across the world are satisfied. Global capacity to produce Covid-19 vaccines is simply not sufficient to meet the sky-high demand. This should be of grave concern for wealthier nations, as the fight against the virus must be global. As John Nkengasong, director of the Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention, said, "We are very concerned as a continent that we will not have access to vaccines in a timely fashion," suggesting that it could be mid-way through 2021 when mass vaccination starts in Africa.

There are limited reasons to be hopeful. Oxford and AstraZeneca have made vital pledges to provide a billion doses for low- and middle-income countries, with a commitment to provide 400-million doses before the end of 2020. This is far beyond any commitment made by other vaccine providers.

This all leads to the question of funding. The African Union has received a pledge of \$5bn from the World Bank but this falls significantly short of the \$12bn that is necessary to purchase essential quantities of the vaccine. South Africa's President Cyril Ramaphosa has rightly stressed the utmost importance of this fundraising and the need for African states to ensure vaccination of around 60% of their population to prevent further transmission and death from Covid-19, just as countries across the Western world are planning.

## Impact of the virus

It is true, however, that Africa countries have navigated the global pandemic with a surprising degree of success. In April 2020, the United Nations warned that Africa would be the next continent to be in turmoil at the hands of Covid -19. It was

predicted that the virus could directly kill at least 300,000 people and even possibly as many as 3.3 million. These predictions have not materialised. A young population across the continent and significant expertise from dealing with previous epidemics such as Ebola and HIV has instead meant that, to date, it is estimated there has been 40,000 people who have lost their lives in the pandemic.

The reasons for this remarkable escape have been much discussed, however great credit should go to the well-trained medical professionals who have utilised the existing health infrastructure and their expertise in handling pandemics to great effect. Africans' knowledge about infectious diseases has saved lives.

This inevitably leads to the question of whether African countries, due to their relative success in handling Covid-19, are in as great a need as the likes of the United Kingdom, Brazil, and the United States of America for a vaccine?

## **Africa's vulnerability**

I am in no doubt that Africa remains extremely vulnerable. Across the continent, there is an average of less than one intensive care bed per 100,000 people. In comparison, the United States has 34.7 beds per 100,000 people. The absence of financial rescue packages is hitting African agriculture even harder. I have seen first-hand, through my role with African Green Resources, the challenges faced in a sector upon which 54% of people rely for employment. These challenges are steadily increasing, mainly through the knock-on effects of measures being taken globally to combat the spread of Covid-19 cases.

African countries are equally desperate for access to a vaccine as developed nations around the world. While It is true that the world would do well to learn from the way in which African countries have handled the pandemic, the continent must now not be left behind. Funding for African governments to access the Covid-19 vaccine and roll-out mass vaccinations is vital. It cannot be left until midway through 2021.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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