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NOTE

From:	Presidency
To:	Permanent Representatives Committee/Council
Subject:	COVID-19: the next challenges for the EU's vaccine strategy - <i>Exchange of views</i>

Delegations will find attached a Presidency background note to serve as a basis for the exchange of views on 'COVID-19: the next challenges for the EU's strategy on vaccine solidarity', due to take place at the EPSCO (Health) Council meeting scheduled for 29 March 2022.

The next challenges for the EU's vaccine strategy

Exchange of views

In 2022, two years after the start of the pandemic, the world still faces the challenges posed by the circulation of the COVID-19 virus.

As from 2020, the European Commission and the Member States have organised a joint procurement system in order to secure the supply and facilitate the distribution of vaccine doses.

At international level, the ACT-A and COVAX mechanisms have been at the heart of a multilateral approach. In early February 2022, COVAX reached the symbolic milestone of one billion doses shipped. Thanks to their shared commitment, Member States have made a major contribution to making the COVAX donation process a reality. The doses donated by the EU now account for 50% of the doses made available to COVAX.

In the light of recent developments, it is important that Member States update their supply and donation strategies and engage in discussions with their partners in order to address the new vaccine challenges posed by the pandemic.

1/ Sharing a common European scientific approach

The current procurement system was designed on the basis of innovations shared by laboratories and international comparisons, but the vaccination strategies of the EU Member States remain different. These differences include in particular:

- variations in the time between booster doses administered after the initial vaccination;
- different heterologous vaccination arrangements;
- the integration of new and adapted vaccines into some national vaccination strategies.

In order to strengthen their bargaining power and consolidate their purchase decisions, EU Member States could make more use of a common scientific approach, drawing on the expertise available in the EMA, and also in the ECDC and the HSC.

2/ Updating the contracts to address the new epidemiological situation in conjunction with the manufacturers and the European Commission

The European context has changed considerably. At present:

- A large proportion of the European population have received their primary vaccinations;
- The momentum of the vaccination campaigns has slowed down considerably;
- The Member States hold large quantities of doses, which make it possible to respond to any resurgence of the epidemic in the short and medium term;
- The European portfolio of COVID-19 vaccines has been enriched and European dose production capacities are now considerable.

Against this background, an adaptation of the contracts could be considered.

3/ Strengthening the Team Europe donation strategy

In order to strengthen the robustness of the EU's donation strategy, donor countries could commit to improving the predictability of the quantities available for COVAX donations. This is essential in order to avoid overloading COVAX. A new delivery plan for doses earmarked for donations and not yet received could be drawn up in conjunction with the laboratories.

4/ Encouraging GAVI to prioritise donations of doses in its consolidated vaccine portfolio

Given the increasing number of refusals of dose donations, there is an urgent need to ask GAVI to confirm that no new purchase options or new orders will be activated, but rather that priority will be given to the donated doses in the updated vaccine portfolio.

In order to optimise the volumes available and to avoid multiple uncoordinated deliveries, COVAX should remain the global vaccine solidarity platform; we should encourage our partners to channel their donations through COVAX and move towards opening this mechanism to all interested countries (including China). By creating the conditions for a pull flow system, based on the needs of the receiving countries, vaccines would be delivered more efficiently and quickly.

5/ Revising the overall vaccination target

At the end of 2021, the WHO set the target of vaccinating at least 70% of the world's population by the end of June 2022. This recommendation, based on scientific knowledge that was incomplete at the time, has guided our strategies and investments so far. Today, in the light of the evolution of the epidemiological situation and of the scientific knowledge now available, the updating of our vaccination target is a factor that needs to be integrated into our collective reflections.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, ACT-A has been designed to ensure the flexibility and agility of our vaccination strategies. Today, more than ever, these adaptive capacities are necessary.

Questions

Q1: What organisational arrangements do you consider necessary at European level to coordinate monitoring, expertise and guidance on vaccine strategy and/or supply?

Q2: What levers should be used to strengthen the European vaccine donation strategy?