



**STATEMENT BY
H.E. MS. CHILESHE MPUNDU KAPWEPWE
SECRETARY GENERAL
DURING THE OFFICIAL OPENING OF THE COMESA- AFRICA CDC MEETING
ON EXPERIENCE SHARING ON VACCINES UPTAKE IN MEMBER STATES**

4 August 2021

**Our Chief Guest, Honourable Dr Daniel Ngamije, Minister of Health
in the Republic of Rwanda,**

Director of Africa CDC, Dr John Nkengasong

Permanent Secretaries and Senior Government Officials

**The representatives of the Africa CDC Regional Collaborating
Centres,**

Representatives of cooperating partners

**Ambassador Dr Kipyego Cheluget, COMESA Assistant Secretary
General in charge of Programmes,**

**Dr Dev Haman, COMESA Assistant Secretary General Admin and
Finance**

Distinguished delegates

Dear Colleagues

All protocol observed

Good morning

On behalf of the COMESA Secretariat and on my own behalf, I am honored to welcome you to this meeting which is aimed at improving the uptake of COVID-19 vaccine in COMESA Member States.

At the outset, I wish to express our sincere appreciation to the Africa CDC for their partnership with us to host this important meeting. I also wish to express gratitude to you, distinguished participants for making time to join us this morning as I also acknowledge with much appreciation the member states that have agreed to share their experiences with us.

After COVID-19 broke out in December 2019 and despite the efforts by most countries globally to prevent its spread by closing borders, we soon realized that we are strongly inter-connected and how superficial our borders really are. While in the COMESA region the first case was recorded on 14th February 2020, by end of April 2020, within two and a half months, all the Member States had recorded positive cases.

In realization that no country was safe if all countries were not safe, we expressed our solidarity with our stakeholders and called for increased unity of purpose among Member States. The aim was to jointly address the adverse effects of COVID 19 on the health citizens in our Member States which have in turn led to a huge negative impact on our economies. This has guided the focus of our meeting today.

Distinguished Delegates,

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly changed all our lives and the way we do business. Within a relatively short period of time, we have all had to find ways to ensure that we continue to carry out our business and social activities. At COMESA Secretariat, we have adopted several mitigating measures, including teleworking, in an effort to safeguard the health safety of our staff members and minimize the risk of infection.

From the outset, we set up the Covid19 taskforce team spearheaded at the Assistant Secretary General level. The team has coordinated the implementation of several initiatives taken by the Secretariat. We have launched and completed a study on the socio-economic impact of Covid19 in the Member States which is available on the COMESA website for reference and usage.

We also developed guidelines to facilitate movement of goods and services across the region, with the adoption of common guidelines at Tripartite level, and also modalities of joining hands with other RECs to facilitate mobilization of resources. In addition, we developed an online portal for the exchange of information on the production and supply of essential goods in our region as well as information on mitigation measures deployed by our Member States. These interventions and others were some of our actions aimed at bridging the gap between policy intentions and implementation outcomes.

We also provided support to our host country, Zambia in terms of a donation of protective equipment to communities. We have also been closely monitoring the statistics for the number of cases as well the number of recoveries in COMESA Member States and by the end of July 2021, COMESA had recorded over 2.3 million Covid-19 cases since February 2020, out of which 1.9 million recoveries had been recorded whilst 303 thousand cases remained active.

Distinguished delegates

The COMESA Treaty places an emphasis on the welfare and wellbeing of the region's citizenry, and this includes the health of the people. The Treaty in itself has a wide-ranging series of objectives, which include, in its priorities, cooperation of Member States on Health to ensure health security of the citizens as well as the promotion of peace and security in the region.

Our focus is on the formation of a large economic and trading bloc that is capable of overcoming some of the challenges and barriers that are

faced by individual states. Without a healthy population, economic transformation and growth and indeed sustainable development, which are at the heart of COMESA's mandate, will be hindered and heavily compromised.

Over the past year, we have put in all effort to continue to support cross border trade and implementing infrastructure projects with the engagement of relevant stakeholders while ensuring that our programmes and activities continue to run as efficiently as possible, despite the challenges occasioned by the pandemic.

Indeed, Covid19 has demonstrated how vulnerable the region and Africa, in general, is, especially with the emergence of more virulent variants. Yet, I must commend all our Permanent Secretaries and other health officials present here, and especially all our frontline workers, who have worked tirelessly to fight the pandemic and have been at the forefront of deploying all efforts in their respective countries to curb the spread of the virus.

Ladies and gentlemen, dear delegates,

COMESA has not yet operationalized its health desk due to some constraints beyond our control. However, we have collaborated with partners who are experts in the field of health and are doing trailblazing work. In this regard, allow me to thank the Africa CDC for their continued partnership, support and guidance on how COMESA can better support its Member States in mitigating the impact of the pandemic.

Specifically, I have had a few meetings with Dr Nkengasong and I am proud of this collaboration between the Africa CDC Headquarters, the Regional Collaborating Centres, and the COMESA Secretariat. I must specifically mention that COMESA has been regularly attending and participating in ministerial meetings and webinars organised by Africa CDC. This has been achieved under the effective leadership of Dr Nkengasong and his team, in implementing the Africa joint continental strategy on COVID 19.

As history bears testimony, human beings have been most resilient in the face of adversity. The Covid19 situation is one such formidable challenge. As health experts continue to advocate, vaccines remain our most effective tool to achieve immunity and provide a ray of hope that we can eventually return to our 'normal' lives. I cannot over-emphasize the importance of vaccines. On our part, we have repeatedly encouraged our staff members to get vaccinated.

Distinguished delegates

Despite the challenges faced in accessing vaccines due to limited global supply, I am happy to report that most of our Member States have started their vaccination campaigns. Seychelles and Mauritius, for example, have managed to vaccinate more than 90% and 70% of their populations, respectively.

Let me take this opportunity to congratulate one of our Member States, Egypt, that has commenced manufacturing Sinovac vaccine. This is a great achievement in addressing challenges related to vaccine equity. Efforts are also underway in Rwanda, among other Member States to

localize vaccine manufacturing. These are some of the examples of the existing political will in the Member States to boost capacity of local manufacturing of vaccines, other medicines, and health technology.

Regarding Objectives: This meeting is therefore a first step to encourage Member States (1) to identify reasons behind slow uptake of the vaccines,

(2) to share experiences and learn from each other in order to improve COVID-19 vaccine uptake,

(3) to discuss and adopt strategies to improve vaccine awareness and overcome barriers to vaccine uptake and roll out. This experience sharing meeting will contribute to the achievement of the goal to improve COVID-19 vaccine uptake in COMESA Member States through experience sharing.

Our expected outputs for this meeting include:

1. Identification of reasons and causes of the low uptake of vaccine in the Member States.
2. Improved strategies of COMESA Member States to increase COVID-19 vaccines uptake in their countries.
3. Strengthened collaboration between the COMESA Member States on the COVID-19 response and vaccine.

I thank all the partners and Member States that agreed to share their experiences including findings of studies undertaken on vaccines uptake and roll-out. I urge Member States to take advantage of the experts from the Africa CDC, WHO, UNICEF who are present in this meeting to raise

some of the challenges that they have been facing and how they can better address them.

Honourable Minister

It gives me a great honour and pleasure to have you as our chief guest given tremendous progress your country has made in controlling the spread of the Coronavirus pandemic.

Let meconclude by once again thanking each one of you, Permanent Secretaries, public health officials, and all delegates, for dedicating your time to attend this experience-sharing meeting.

I also extend my appreciations to the Africa CDC team in Lusaka and my staff at the Secretariat for the work they have done in organising this virtual meeting.

I wish you fruitful deliberations