

Supply chain strain threatening COVID vaccine mass scale-up

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The unprecedented scaling-up of vaccine manufacturing to counter COVID-19 has sparked dangerous shortages in the supply chain, global players acknowledged Tuesday after brainstorming how to speed up production of the jabs.

Starting at zero when the pandemic began, [vaccine manufacturers](#) expect to be able to produce some 10 billion doses of various COVID-19 vaccines this year—double the manufacturing capacity for all vaccines combined in 2019.

"This is the largest ramping up of manufacturing the world has ever seen," Thomas Cueni, the head of the International Federation of Pharmaceutical Manufacturers and Associations (IFPMA), told a virtual press briefing.

But the strain of this massive scale-up is beginning to show, Cueni acknowledged, after participating in a two-day online meeting on ways to unblock bottlenecks and rapidly boost vaccine production to combat the coronavirus that has killed 2.6 million people in 14 months.

"We should not be surprised if there are bumps along the road," Cueni said, pointing out that "hundreds of [raw materials](#) (are) needed to make vaccines."

"It will inevitably lead to bottlenecks that will urgently need to be addressed."

The meeting, organised by the Chatham House think-tank, along with IFPMA and the Covax vaccine distribution initiative, brought together a range of players, including government delegates, pharmaceutical representatives and scientists.

'Signs of strain'

Names of participants were not divulged, the World Trade Organization's new chief Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala said in a statement she had been there and had in particular urged vaccine manufacturers to do more to ramp up production in developing countries.

She described the current inequities between access to vaccines in wealthy and [poorer countries](#) as "unconscionable".

Manufacturing the vaccines requires not just an unprecedented quantity of ingredients, but also items such as glass for the vials and plastic for their caps—at a time when [global supply chains](#) have been disrupted by the pandemic.

The Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations (CEPI), which co-runs Covax with the World Health Organization and Gavi, testified to recently seeing "increasing signs of strain within supply chains".

CEPI chief Richard Hatchett told Tuesday's briefing that companies were "beginning to report spot shortages of critical materials, raw materials, critical consumables, even equipment that is necessary for vaccine manufacturing".

This "stuttering supply" has caused a number of countries to consider actions like imposing export controls, something he warned could be hugely problematic in an interconnected world, putting entire vaccine supply chains at risk.

US restrictions 'a real problem'

Hatchett pointed in particular to the use of the US Defense Production Act to fight the pandemic, basically reserving specific items for American manufacturing only.

"If those items become in short supply for manufacturers that are outside of the United States and cannot be replaced, then that would disrupt vaccine manufacturing at facilities outside the United States," he said.

"It is a real problem."

In a statement, the meeting organisers called for the "free flow of goods and workforce" to ensure vaccine production.

They also encouraged continued technology transfer and manufacturing partnerships between pharmaceutical companies and manufacturers to scale up capacity, like the deal AstraZeneca has with the Serum Institute of India.

But no mention was made about calls at the World Trade Organization, led by India and South Africa, to waive intellectual property (IP) rights for COVID-19 vaccines—a notion fiercely rejected by pharmaceutical giants and their host countries.

"Everybody who knows about [vaccine](#) manufacturing... knew that IP is not the issue; the bottlenecks are the capacity, the scarcity of raw materials, scarcity of ingredients," Cueni said.

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