Wamkele Mene, the secretary-general of the African Continental Free Trade Area has described the global intellectual property rights system as “outdated” saying it is constraining Africa’s industrialization.

The head of the world’s biggest free trade area, AfCTA, made the plea in Johannesburg after attending a conference on post-pandemic economic recovery and trade hosted in his home country.

“This pandemic has shown that the IP rights regime is outdated, particularly for Africa. Particularly for Africa… If we want to defeat these viruses, we have to re-look at all these questions of compulsory licensing. If we have an intellectual property rights regime that enables Africa to produce vaccines without being in violation of WTO (World Trade Organization) law, that’s what we have to do”, defended Wamkele Mene, secretary-general of the African Continental Free Trade Area.

The first Covid-19 vaccine-producing facility in Africa opened this Wednesday in Algeria. The facility produces the vaccine Sinovac developed by China.

This month the Algerian authorities announced a plan to vaccinate 70% of the population by the end of the year.

Changing the intellectual rights regime is essential for the future of Africa, said Wamkele Mene.

“It will enable us to respond to Africa’s public health imperatives because we will now be able to produce generic drugs, we will now be able to produce the vaccines that are required, not only for this pandemic, but for future pandemics. So this intellectual property rights regime, in my opinion, it’s at the heart of the challenges we are facing today”, said the trade chief.

Just over four percent of eligible Africans have been fully immunized against Covid-19, compared to more than 60 percent in rich nations.

South Africa and India are among the countries pushing for a temporary waiver of intellectual property rights in order to boost vaccine production in developing countries.

But there is fierce resistance from big pharma and their host countries, which insist patents are not the main roadblocks to scaling up production and warn the move could hamper innovation.