- All 54 countries on the continent have expressed interest in COVAX

While the race to find safe and effective COVID-19 vaccines continues, African countries are signing up to a ground-breaking initiative, which aims to secure at least 220 million doses of the vaccine for the continent, once licensed and approved.

All 54 countries on the continent have expressed interest in COVAX, a global initiative which is co-led by the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations (CEPI), Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance (Gavi) and the World Health Organization (WHO). The partners are working with governments and manufacturers to procure enough vaccine doses to protect the most vulnerable populations on the continent. Through the Gavi-coordinated COVAX Facility, the initiative seeks to ensure access for all: both higher and middle-income countries which will self-finance their own participation, and lower-middle income and low-income countries which will have their participation supported by the COVAX Advance Market Commitment (AMC).

There are eight countries in Africa that have agreed to self-finance their vaccine doses through the COVAX Facility. This expression of interest will turn into binding commitments to join the initiative by 18 September, with upfront payments to follow no later than 9 October 2020.

“Equatorial Guinea has signed up to COVAX as it’s the most effective way to ensure that our people can access COVID-19 vaccines,” said Hon Mitoha Ondo’O Ayekaba, Vice Minister for Health and Social Welfare, Equatorial Guinea. “We are concerned as some wealthier countries have made moves to secure their own interests. We believe that through this initiative we can access successfully tested vaccines in a timely manner and at lower cost.”

In addition, 46 countries in Africa are eligible for support from the financing instrument, the COVAX AMC which has raised approximately US$ 700 million against an initial target of securing US$ 2 billion seed funding from high-income donor countries, as well as private sector and philanthropists by the end of 2020.

“COVAX is a ground-breaking global initiative which will include African countries and ensure they are not left at the back of the queue for COVID-19 vaccines,” said Dr Matshidiso Moeti, WHO Regional Director for Africa. “By reaching beyond the continent to work together with other governments and manufacturers on a global scale and pooling buying power, countries can protect the people most vulnerable

to the disease in Africa."

CEPI is leading COVAX vaccine research and aims to develop up to three safe and effective vaccines which will be made available to countries participating in the COVAX Facility. Nine candidate vaccines are currently being supported by CEPI; two are currently being tested in South Africa, in addition to other regions around the world.

"It's critical that countries in Africa participate in vaccine trials, in addition to the clinical trials taking place in other regions of the world," said Dr Richard Hatchett, Chief Executive Officer, CEPI. "Testing vaccines on the continent ensures that sufficient data is generated on the safety and efficacy of the most promising vaccine candidates for the African population so they can be confidently rolled out in Africa once vaccines are approved. CEPI is investing in the research and development of a diverse range of vaccine candidates, with the aim of delivering safe and effective vaccines to those who need them most through COVAX."

Through COVAX, vaccines that have passed regulatory approval or WHO prequalification will be delivered equally to all participating countries, proportional to their populations. Health workers and other vulnerable populations will be prioritized and then vaccine availability will expand to cover additional priority populations in participating countries.

African countries will need to have in place the right systems and infrastructure to define the regulatory and ethical pathways for a quick approval of a candidate vaccine. They will need to have logistics and supply chain systems which can reach not only the traditional target populations for routine immunizations and campaigns but be ready to vaccinate a much larger target population.

"To roll out a vaccine effectively across countries in Africa, it is critical that communities are engaged and understand the need for vaccination," said Dr Richard Mihigo, Programme Area Manager, Immunization and Vaccine Development, Programme Area Manager, Immunization and Vaccine Development, WHO Regional Office for Africa. "It is important to already start working with communities to prepare the way for one of the largest vaccination campaigns Africa has ever experienced."

Dr Mihigo, Dr Hatchett and Vice Minister Mitoha Ondo'O Ayekaba participated in a virtual press conference on COVID-19 vaccine access in Africa today facilitated by

APO Group.