



# Cuba Pledges COVID-19 Vaccine Support to the Global South

By Progressive International



The Cuban government has announced advanced plans to deliver tens of millions of doses of homegrown Covid-19 vaccines to the Global South, described as “lifesaving” by the head of the Progressive International’s delegation to the Caribbean nation.

Rolando Pérez Rodríguez, Director of Science and Innovation, BioCubaFarma; Olga Lidia Jacobo-Casanueva, Director, Center for State Control of Medicines and Medical Devices (CECMED); Ileana Morales Suárez, Director of Science and Technology Innovation, Ministry of Public Health, Cuba and Coordinator of the national vaccination plan for Covid-19 addressed and took questions from journalists, vaccine manufacturers, public health experts and political representatives from other countries.

Despite the US embargo, Cuba has received funding from The Central American Bank for Economic Integration, which, according to Reuters, is sufficient to produce the 200 million doses. Yesterday (Monday 24 January) at a press briefing in Havana, Dr Vicente Vérez Bencomo, Director General of the Finley Institute of Vaccines said, “they could produce 120 million doses in one year alone.”

At the briefing, the Cuban government announced its plan to get these doses into the arms of those who need them in the Global South, including:

1. Solidarity prices for Covid-19 vaccines for low-income countries;
2. Technology transfer where possible for production in low-income countries;
3. Extending medical brigades to build medical capacity and training for vaccine distribution in partner countries.

The briefing was organised by Progressive International in response to what the World Health Organization (WHO) [called](#) a “tsunami” of new Covid-19 cases crashing over the world at the beginning of 2022, [a record number](#) since the pandemic began in 2020, amid a situation that WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus [described](#) as “vaccine apartheid”. The impact of Covid-19 has been violently unequal: 80 percent of adults in the EU are fully vaccinated, but only 9.5 percent of people in low-income countries have received a single dose of the vaccine.

1. Solidarity prices for Covid-19 vaccines for low-income countries:
  - Cuba has already vaccinated its own population, with more than 90 percent receiving at least one dose of homegrown vaccine.
  - Price inequities have plagued the Covid-19 vaccine landscape. World Health Organisation (WHO) data analysed by The Independent shows that governments of lower-income countries are paying a median price of \$6.88 (£5.12) per dose for Covid vaccines. Before the pandemic, developing countries paid a median price of \$0.80 a dose for non-Covid jabs, WHO figures show. South Africa has been forced to buy doses of the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine at a price 2.5 times higher than that paid by most European countries. Bangladesh and Uganda have also paid more than the EU for the vaccine.
  - COVAX, the global vaccine procurement initiative meant to ensure a subsidised supply of vaccines to poorer countries has repeatedly fallen short of its goals and in September 2021, [announced](#) a 25 percent reduction in its expected vaccine supply for 2021.
  - Cuba has sent donations to countries that requested assistance with Covid-19 vaccines, including recently, to Syria and St. Vincent and the Grenadines. In addition, it has exported doses and negotiated tech-transfer deals with other countries including Argentina, Iran, Venezuela, Vietnam and Nicaragua.
2. Technology transfer where possible for production in low-income countries: Cuba is in conversations with more than 15 countries regarding production in their countries.
  - Cuba’s vaccines use a protein sub-unit technology platform, based on protein antigens, which makes them easy to produce at scale and simple to store, as they do not require freezing temperatures.
  - Cuba’s offer is likely to find many interested buyers, many of whom have been turned away by big pharmaceutical companies. John Fulton, spokesperson for Canadian manufacturer Biolyse said, “I am interested in this showcase because Cuba presents a unique model of vaccine internationalism. Looking forward to hearing what opportunities may exist in regards to tech transfer for the production of COVID-19 vaccines for lower-income nations.” Biolyse has attempted to seek a compulsory licence through Canada’s Access to Medicines Regime specifically for the Johnson & Johnson/Janssen vaccine.
  - Last month, experts [identified](#) more than 100 companies in Africa, Asia, and Latin America with the potential to produce mRNA vaccines, urging the governments of US and Germany to compel their pharmaceutical companies to share technology. However, no progress has been made and at the beginning of the year, the World Health Organization [lamented](#) the fact that “lack of sharing of licences, technology and know-how by pharmaceutical companies meant manufacturing capacity went unused.”
  - BioCubaFarma, the Cuban state-run biotechnology organisation has been in close contact with representatives at the WHO in order to obtain a prequalification status for its Covid19

vaccines, which they hope to do in 2022. A complete dossier of data is scheduled to be delivered to the WHO by the beginning of February. In addition, Cuba plans to work with the national regulatory agencies of all the countries interested in acquiring the Cuban vaccines.

3. Extending medical brigades to build medical capacity and training for vaccine distribution in partner countries:

- Cuba plans to send its Henry Reeve Brigades to countries in need of support with vaccine distribution, both for immediate deployment and longer term training of personnel.
- Disparities in the ability to distribute vaccines are hindering governments' abilities to ensure a speedy rollout of Covid-19 vaccines in many low-income countries. According to the international humanitarian organisation CARE, the cost for vaccine rollouts in developing countries has been vastly under-calculated by international donors leading to many donated doses lying around waiting to get into arms. Kate O'Brien, the WHO's vaccine director, reportedly said that funding for distribution "is absolutely an issue that we're experiencing and hearing about from countries."
- Cuba has a successful history of this approach: In 2014 and 2015, Cuban medics worked against Ebola in Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Guinea, reducing the mortality rates of their patients from 50 to 20 per cent and introduced a preventative education programme to stop the disease spreading. By January 2015, Cuba had trained over 13,000 people to deal with Ebola in 28 African countries, plus 68,000 people in Latin America and 628 in the Caribbean. Since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, some 40 countries across five continents have received Cuban medics.
- The offer of technical assistance holds great promise for developing countries as many have shifted focus to building robust domestic biotech industries. At the Progressive International Summit, Anyang' Nyong'o, Governor of Kenya's Kisumu County, invited Cuba "to come to Kenya to share technology and expand production of the vaccine candidates you are developing."

The briefing follows the Progressive International's four-day Summit for Vaccine Internationalism held in June 2021 which hailed a "new international health order" and saw participation from the national governments of Argentina, Mexico, Bolivia, Cuba and Venezuela as well as the regional governments of Kisumu, Kenya and Kerala, India alongside political leaders from 20 countries.

At today's briefing, responding to expressions of interest in Cuba's vaccines, Rolando Pérez Rodríguez, Director of Science and Innovation, BioCubaFarma, said:

"Cuba is open to any proposal that implies a greater impact of our vaccines in the world."

David Adler, general coordinator of the Progressive International and head of its delegation to Cuba, said:

"Today's announcements by Cuban scientists should mark an historic turning point in the history of the Covid-19 pandemic. This lifesaving package sets the standard for vaccine internationalism and a pathway to a New International Health Order, where public health and science are placed above private profit and petty nationalism."

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*This article was first published by [Progressive International](#).*

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