

New products alone are not enough. Pharma can do more to halt COVID-19.

By Danny J Edwards, Research Programme Manager, Access to Medicine Foundation
14 April 2020

The COVID-19 epidemic will hit the most vulnerable people hardest. The pharmaceutical industry has a responsibility to do more than develop new vaccines and medicines – it must also help achieve fair, global access to new products.

The COVID-19 pandemic is confirming many important truths – two of which stand out from the perspective of our organisation. First, any successful response requires the pharmaceutical industry to fully engage and respond with agility. This industry will play a critical role in saving lives first and foremost and in getting us back on our feet to restart a stalling global economy.

Second, this pandemic is going to hit the people living in low- and middle-income countries the hardest. With weaker health systems and greater threats to health, these countries face a tougher challenge from COVID-19. The HIV/AIDS epidemic is not over; malaria and TB remain some of the world's biggest killers. All three diseases disproportionately affect the most vulnerable people among us.

The pharmaceutical industry is now working toward new treatments and vaccines targeting COVID-19. This is one half of the equation. When those new products leave the pipeline, ensuring they are made widely accessible will be the central issue. People in more vulnerable countries and communities must not be left behind.

At the Access to Medicine Foundation, we work every day to stimulate and guide the pharmaceutical industry to do more for people living in low- and middle-income countries. We

have been tracking and evaluating their actions in this area for more than [ten years](#).

Positive steps being taken

The actions for pharmaceutical companies to take during this crisis are clear: the development and equitable delivery of health products, done in an ethical and responsible manner. We have confirmed these priorities via a broad-ranging stakeholder dialogue and distilled them into the [new analytical framework](#) for the next Access to Medicine Index.

It is encouraging to see companies already taking positive steps in response to global calls for action, particularly to develop new medicines and vaccines. This is despite some counter examples, such as movements (now reversed) to extend or safeguard exclusivity rights for potential treatments. We are currently gathering data for the next [Access to Medicine Index](#), which will evaluate and compare the responses of 20 of the world's largest pharmaceutical companies to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Actions concentrated among few players

Despite rapid action from some companies, the fragility and reach of the industry's ambition is troubling when it comes to halting the pandemic in low- and middle-income countries. Actions are concentrated amongst few players, [repeating a pattern revealed by our research](#) into pharma company responses to global health priorities. There had been precious little engagement prior to this year in emerging infectious disease research

About the Access to Medicine Foundation

The Access to Medicine Foundation is an independent, non-profit organisation based in the Netherlands. It aims to advance access to medicine in low- and middle-income countries by stimulating and guiding the pharmaceutical industry to play a greater role in improving access to medicine. The Foundation is funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Dutch Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport and the UK Department for International Development.

(see figure), and [only a handful of large companies remain in the development of new antibiotics](#).

This risk of decline in the long-term engagement of the pharmaceutical industry leaves us all vulnerable. A larger group of companies is needed, both to address COVID-19 and to prepare for the next pandemic. Companies who have already left the field of infectious disease research still have important roles to play: in sharing their expertise and intellectual property, contributing manufacturing capacity, securing supply and affordability of their products.

Success means achieving global access

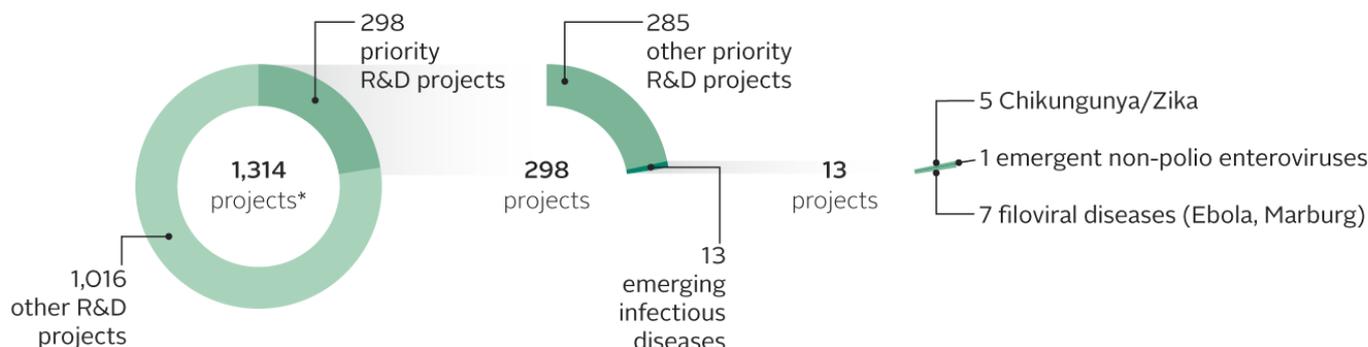
Halting this pandemic depends on global access to effective treatments and vaccines. More than 80% of the global population currently lives in low- and middle-income countries. The pharmaceutical industry should ensure that new and effective products are made available and affordable to

patients, regardless of where they live or their economic circumstance. Fair allocation must be made amongst all countries. To achieve equitable global access at scale, pharmaceutical companies must be open to bold, ambitious ideas, such as the [voluntary pooling of patents](#). When it comes to vaccines, global access is key to building herd immunity and eradicating the virus. When it comes to medicines, global access will help to free up beds in ICU wards. Both save lives.

When the goal of ending the threat of COVID-19 is achieved, the benchmark for success will not be an approved vaccine or therapy. It will be whether people received life-saving treatment regardless of where they lived or what they earned. If we can achieve this, as a global community of public and private actors, then we will be able to say we have kept our [shared promises](#) to the most vulnerable.

R&D for emerging infectious diseases (EIDs) comprised 1% of R&D projects in 2018

This figure shows the number of reported priority R&D projects including projects for EIDs in 2018. The 13 EID projects targeted chikungunya, emergent non-polio enteroviruses, filoviral diseases or Zika. No reported projects targeted coronaviruses.



*Scope of analysis: R&D projects targeting 77 conditions, diseases and pathogens from 20 pharmaceutical companies.

Source: Access to Medicine Foundation 2020

Which companies are already taking action against COVID-19?

Early and ambitious action by companies sets the standard for others. To stimulate pharmaceutical companies to act now, here is a non-exhaustive list of positive actions already being taken by companies:

Companies developing urgently needed new health products; some are also planning ahead to ensure supply and rapid access globally once products reach the market

- The COVID-19 Therapeutics Accelerator, created by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Wellcome Trust and Mastercard, seeks to accelerate development of therapies to treat COVID-19. It is committed to ensuring equitable access to products in low-resource settings. [Fifteen life science companies have joined so far](#), with many companies sharing compound libraries and corresponding clinical trial data.
- [GSK and Sanofi have announced a collaboration to develop a vaccine for COVID-19](#), committing to make any vaccine developed through the collaboration affordable to the public and through mechanisms that offer fair access for people in all countries.
- [GSK has partnered with the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations \(CEPI\)](#), and several others, to provide its vaccine adjuvant technology. CEPI is supporting the development of eight vaccine candidates, including [Moderna Therapeutics'](#), which was the first COVID-19 preventive vaccine candidate to enter clinical trials.
- [Johnson & Johnson has announced a lead COVID-19 vaccine candidate](#), in partnership with the Biomedical Advanced Research and Development Authority (BARDA) and has committed to supplying one billion vaccines worldwide, on a not-for-profit basis, for emergency pandemic use.
- Pfizer is investigating potential treatments and [co-developing a potential COVID-19 vaccine](#). Outside of these products, it has [committed](#) to sharing expertise, data, lessons learned and manufacturing capacity for any successful treatments or vaccines with other companies.
- [Mologic's point-of-need diagnostic for COVID-19](#) is undergoing early validation in the UK before expanding to validation by partners in China, Malaysia, Senegal and beyond. This diagnostic allows for home-use, and Mologic has committed to selling the diagnostic test at-cost to low-income settings and to manufacturing in the UK and Senegal.
- [Gilead is investigating remdesivir](#), formerly investigated for the treatment of Ebola, for the treatment of COVID-19; the company's CEO has pledged to 'work towards access and affordability'.

Companies taking steps to ensure sufficient supply of and global access to quality-assured health products on the market.

- [AbbVie is donating a supply of lopinavir/ritonavir \(Altera®\) to Chinese](#) health authorities as an investigative treatment for COVID-19. AbbVie later committed to not enforcing patents for this medicine worldwide.
- [Novartis has committed to donating up to 130 million doses of hydroxychloroquine](#) where supported for use in COVID-19 patients and in clinical trials by regulatory authorities. It will consult with WHO to meet global demand.
- [Sandoz CEO Richard Saynor has committed to keeping prices stable for a basket of essential medicines](#) that may prove helpful in addressing the COVID-19 pandemic, including antivirals and antibiotics.
- Pfizer, Teva and other companies have issued statements regarding the global supply of medicines and state of their supply chains, and adjusted tactics, including increasing production and prioritising essential products to prevent stockouts.