

**CLOSING REMARKS**  
**3<sup>rd</sup> IGAD Covid-19 Regional Response Project Steering Committee Meeting**  
**WORKNEH GEBEYEHU, EXECUTIVE SECRETARY**  
**Tuesday 13<sup>th</sup> July 2021**

---

- Dr. **Shahinaz Badri**, Director General of the Sudan National Public Health laboratory and representing the IGAD Chair;
- Dr. **Dereje Duguma**, State Minister of Health, Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia;
- **Directors of Medical Services** from IGAD Member States;
- **Directors of Public Health Emergency Operation Centres** in IGAD Member States;
- **Directors National Public Health Laboratories** in IGAD Member States;
- **Dr. Fatuma Adan**, IGAD Head of Mission to the Republic of Kenya;
- Dear Members of our IGAD Family;
- Distinguished Participants;
- Ladies and Gentlemen;
- All protocols observed,

Good Afternoon,

It is a **singular privilege to preside over the conclusion of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Meeting of Steering Committee** of the IGAD Covid-19 Regional Response Strategy.

In the inaugural meeting of this committee that we held in June 2020, we were **guided by the declaration of the IGAD Heads of State issued in March 2020 and we arrived at 4 distinct agreements;**

1. The difference we wanted to realize for those vulnerable sections of our population at-risk of covid-19,
2. The specific locales we would make the greatest difference,
3. The mechanisms, approaches and interventions that we would apply to go about making this difference and finally,
4. The timeframes within which would take us to realize the change that our people demanded of us.

During the 2<sup>nd</sup> steering committee meeting in March of this year, we **took stock of the progress we had recorded on the 4 agreements and further approved strategy innovations** such as the proposal to support humanitarian response in Sudan and the IGAD health digitalization strategy.

We also decided that **due to the emergency nature of this intervention, that this committee would meet quarterly** instead of bi-annually so that we may more closely monitor and direct the implementation of the covid response strategy.

Our shared experience as public servants has taught us that **the most effective strategies, like the iconic African stool are balanced on 3 legs;**

- the 1<sup>st</sup> leg is **a clear understanding of what the problem is** (evidence-based diagnosis);
- the 2<sup>nd</sup> leg **an explicit statement of the change we want** (policy);
- and the 3<sup>rd</sup> leg is **the series coordinated, consistent and coherent actions** that are aimed towards resolving the identified problem (implementation plan)

Listening to the detailed deliberations of this project steering committee on COVID-19, **I have gained an even more firm grasp of the scale of the pandemic and the required responses from your perspective as technical experts.**

I have also had the privilege of gaining a deeper appreciation of what we have achieved so far in addressing Covid from a regional perspective. In this regard, **I have discerned a mixed bag of results;**

On one hand, we have made **tremendous progress in the immediate emergency response targeting the 21 cross-border areas, 7 Refugee camps & IDP settlements and 4 migrant reception centers** that we identified.

So far, on behalf of vulnerable communities in our Member States, IGAD has procured over 5 million medical face masks, 1 million PCR covid-test kits, 4 million surgical gloves, 21 high-volume PCR Machines, 21 Ambulances, 5 Field Utility vehicles and 8 Mobile Laboratories.

At this juncture, let us all **appreciate and applaud the singular support of our funding partners in the EU, AfDB, Germany and Sweden** among others in materially supporting the regional response to COVID-19 in the IGAD region.

Furthermore, let us also **recognize the vital role that our implementing partners UNOPS, UNICEF, IOM, GIZ and Trademark East Africa are playing** in supporting IGAD to care for its people.

On the other hand, **the pace of our testing and vaccination programs has been less than ideal**; Only 2.2% of the IGAD population has been tested for Covid-19 and less than 1% has been fully vaccinated.

Let me break this down for all of us; **out of the 294 Million citizens of the IGAD region in 2021, we have conducted approximately 6.6 million tests.** This is indeed a significant achievement for our Member States, but it also reveals the scale of the challenge ahead of us.

In other words, **only 1 out of every 4,500 IGAD citizens has been tested** and there are still 287 Million of our brothers and sisters in need of testing.

The vaccine coverage situation is similarly concerning; **4.6 Million of our people or 1.6% of the regional population have received the 1<sup>st</sup> dose of the vaccine**, but as we know this is not full protection; **as we speak here today, 706,910 IGAD citizens are fully vaccinated with 2 doses representing only 0.2% of our population.** We still have 99.2% to go to realize full immunity.

This is very **worrying particularly in the context of ever more lethal variants of the virus emerging with increasing frequency**, thereby risking the possibility of eroding the efficacy of existing vaccines.

Considering that the global watchword has been “no one is safe until all of us are safe”, **we need to guard against the possibility that the IGAD region and the African continent at large are left behind to become "covid enclaves"** even as the rest of the world moves back towards a semblance of normalcy.

Looking ahead therefore, **I am encouraged by the precision with which this committee has dissected the challenges facing the implementation of our regional response.**

We have been able to distinguish between the obstacles to success that are within our ability to overcome and those that are of a more systemic nature and will require us to pull together as the human race.

In this regard, I want to highlight what I have been able to categorize as the **immediate, intermediate and enduring** recommendations on the way forward.

Of immediate consequence is the **urgent need to scale-up the capacity of our Member States to test for COVID and rapidly expand vaccine coverage** in the region.

One of the most efficient ways to realizing this objective is by **leveraging our comparative advantages, coordinating our emergency response and pooling our procurement, logistics and delivery systems for preventive equipment as well as access to vaccines as a region**, instead of each of our Member States acting alone. In other words, when it comes to prevention and vaccination, *"cooperation is survival, competition is fatal"*.

In the intermediate period, **strengthening the pandemic surveillance capacity of our Member States as well providing critical care for COVID patients is an essential consideration.**

This effective surveillance of pandemics demands that we **strengthen the cooperative collection, collation, analysis and exchange of health data** as articulated by the IGAD health data sharing and protection policy.

One of the **low-hanging and most tangible fruits of this approach is the mutual recognition of PCR test results** across borders and the **development of an integrated COVID QR traveler surveillance code.**

This will be **a vital step towards bringing our Member States closer together** and achieving what can be referred to as **"integration in installments"** for our region.

In conclusion and over the longer-term, **I wholeheartedly welcome the proposal to integrate COVID Vaccination into national immunization programs** as well as most **importantly, build local manufacturing capacity of vaccines in the region.**

It is also essential that **we advocate for the vaccines that shall be eventually produced in our region to receive global recognition and acceptance.**

In this regard, IGAD is ready to work with our Member States, WHO, the African Union's Centers for Disease Control and other like-minded organizations, to **raise our levels of vigilance, quality assurance and regulatory controls over essential pharmaceutical products.**

Finally, I am convinced that the **strengthening of health systems should be holistic enough to also address those primary care services,** including immunization against childhood diseases, gender and mental health services that have been overshadowed by this pandemic especially among vulnerable populations.

I look forward to **seeing all of these significant suggestions incorporated into the response plan** for the approval of our Member States and subsequent implementation within the regional strategy. **We can integrate our region through health cooperation.**

**Thank you very much.**