



Speech | 18 December 2023 | Kigali

Keynote speech by President von der Leyen at the BioNTech Africa Launch Ceremony

Dear President Kagame, dear Paul,

President Sall, dear Macky,

President Akufo-Addo, dear Nana,

Prime Minister Mottley, dear Mia,

Chairperson Faki, dear Moussa,

Minister Baerbock, liebe Annalena,

Minister Phaahla,

Lieber Uğur Şahin,

Liebe Özlem Türeci,

Distinguished guests,

The great African writer Chinua Achebe called it, 'the power of togetherness'. This cutting-edge facility would not have been possible without the shared experience and expertise that we each bring to the table. It is a story of teamwork – between pioneering scientists and innovative businesses, between Africa and Europe, and between government, finance and regulation.

The story started decades ago. Back in the 1990s, two scientists began working on the new kind of technology. mRNA technology was so innovative that they had a difficult time finding money for their research. Now fast-forward two decades: Katalin Karikó and Drew Weissman win the Nobel Prize in Medicine 2023. Their discoveries on mRNA helped save millions of lives around the world. This is also thanks to Uğur Şahin and Özlem Türeci. These two brilliant entrepreneurs and scientists founded BioNTech. Their company developed a vaccine against COVID-19 that was more than 90% effective. This was the big story during the pandemic. But that is not all. mRNA vaccines were produced in record time, faster than any other vaccine in history.

However, ramping up global production capacities remained a huge challenge. Billions of people around the globe needed their doses. But only few plants were able to deliver. I remember, dear President Kagame, our conversation in Paris in 2021, it was at the height of the pandemic. We agreed that Rwanda and Europe must work together not only to bring vaccines to Africa, but to bring vaccine production and mRNA technology to Africa. So, we got together with world-leading companies, like BioNTech. Uğur Şahin and Özlem Türeci, your scientific excellence, your entrepreneurial spirit and your social engagement put BioNTech in the starring role of this joint endeavour. We teamed up with Rwanda, Ghana, Senegal and South Africa. And we built and we are building the first vaccine manufacturing capacity, mRNA producing capacity, on the continent – here in Kigali.

To date, we have, together, already mobilised EUR 1.2 billion as Team Europe. And it is amazing to think that in just two years, these BioNTainers will be producing up to 50 million of doses of vaccines per year. And we are not only speaking about battling the coronavirus. But it is about breaking new ground in the fight against, as you have said, Uğur, tuberculosis, malaria and potentially even cancer. This is the true power of togetherness and technology.

This is also the winning formula behind Global Gateway – Europe's global investment programme. We are, together, mobilising all our assets. Here in Rwanda, Global Gateway is strengthening the regulatory capacity. It is so important to

create a conducive environment for producing pharmaceuticals. We are supporting the Rwanda Food and Drug Administration. And we are investing together in skills and training, mostly dual vocational training, so that local good jobs are created here in your pharma ecosystem. And of course, we are partnering on higher education, connecting Kigali University with counterparts in Europe that specialise in biotechnology. This experience is teaching all of us how we can better work together, also with the private sector. The magic really lies in the public-private teamwork. Through public funding, training and enabling regulation, we can provide the long-term predictability that private investors need to start ambitious projects like this one. It is the whole package that counts.

According to these principles, we are also constructing with President Macky Sall a second manufacturing site in Senegal. Team Europe has accompanied the Senegalese national strategy for relaunching the pharmaceutical industry. Vaccine production capacity is now within reach at the Pasteur Institute of Dakar. In Ghana, we support, dear President Akufo-Addo, your efforts to strengthen the capacities of the Food and Drugs Authority, and the cooperation of the so-called DEK vaccine facility. And we are even expanding this initiative to Latin America and the Caribbean.

Dear Prime Minister Mottley,

I am very glad that you have joined us here today, many thanks for that. What is happening here in Rwanda can also happen in Barbados. And with the South-South cooperation, we are very keen to support this potential vaccine project in Barbados. We can be proud of how much we have achieved together, and of course, of how much we can still achieve. That is why today, we will sign an agreement of an additional EUR 40 million to support Rwanda in its mission to become a centre of medical and technological excellence, and to support the African Union, dear Moussa, to succeed in the goal that you have set yourself. I have never forgotten that you told me that today, Africa is producing 1% of the vaccines that are used in Africa and that the common goal is that by 2040 you are producing 60% of the vaccines needed on the

continent. So I think, we are getting much closer to that goal, which is a real good one, and we should join forces to achieve it.

I will leave the final words to Chinua Achebe: 'Let us smile not because we do not have problems but because we are stronger than the problems.'

Thank you so much.

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