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Covid-19: EU has lessons to learn from early response to pandemic, say auditors

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The European Union has faced “certain challenges” since the start of the covid-19 pandemic, including the provision of medical and personal protective equipment and supporting the development of vaccines, says a review carried out by the European Court of Auditors.¹

The auditors had already flagged weaknesses in the EU’s legal framework for dealing with serious cross border health threats in a 2016 report. Some issues, such as preparedness planning, have proved to be persistent, the new report states.

Its publication comes as cases of covid-19 are rising in many EU countries and much of Europe is still under lockdown. The report highlights problems with the timeliness, quality, and completeness of data received from member states since the pandemic began. In addition, different surveillance and testing strategies make it difficult to compare the epidemiological situation across the EU.

The European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control said that “considerable work still needs to be done to establish and strengthen robust population based surveillance” of covid-19.

Procurement pathways

The EU has only limited responsibilities for public health and is mainly focused on supporting individual countries in areas such as surveillance, preparedness, and coordination of response, the report notes. Since the start of the pandemic the EU took action on urgent issues such as facilitating the supply of medical equipment and gathering information. It allocated €4.5bn (£4bn; \$5.5bn) by mid-2020 to support public health measures.

Procuring medical supplies for the pandemic was a challenge, the report says. EU level procurement of personal protective equipment was more limited than what member states bought through their own national procurement pathways.

“It was a challenge for the EU to rapidly complement the measures taken within its formal remit and support the public health response to the covid-19 crisis,” said Joëlle Elvinger, the member of the European Court of Auditors responsible for the review. “It is too soon to audit ongoing actions or assess the impact of covid-19 related public health EU initiatives, but these experiences can provide lessons for any future reform of the EU’s competences in this field.”

The report says that €547m from the EU budget was allocated by June 2020 for research on developing covid-19 tests, treatments, and vaccines. The European Commission also allocated €1.5bn to fund advance purchase agreements with a range of vaccine technologies and companies.

Ahead of a meeting of European leaders on a coordinated response to the covid-19 crisis, the commission called on member states to accelerate the rollout of vaccination so that by March 2021 at least 80% of people aged over 80 should be vaccinated, as well as 80% of health and social care professionals. By summer, member states should have vaccinated 70% of the entire adult population.

The commission’s president, Ursula von der Leyen, said, “Vaccination is essential to get out of this crisis. We have already secured enough vaccines for the entire population of the European Union. Now we need to accelerate the delivery and speed up vaccination.

“However, we will only end this pandemic when everyone in the world has access to vaccines. We will step up our efforts to help secure vaccines for our neighbours and partners worldwide.”

¹ European Court of Auditors. The EU’s initial contribution to the public health response to covid-19. Jan 2021. https://www.eca.europa.eu/Lists/ECADocuments/RW21_01/RW_public_health_resp_Covid-19_EN.pdf.