



OPENING REMARKS

By Mariano Votta

Responsible EU Affairs at Cittadinanzattiva, Director Active Citizenship Network

Welcome and good afternoon also from me.

I am pleased to note that among those who are connected today, there are some attendees who may not have had the opportunity to participate in our vaccination policy initiatives in the past. I would therefore like to mention our role in the field of vaccination policies. Without making a long and useless list of activities put in place for years at the national (Italy) and European level by the association for which I work, it is good to remember that we work to:

- broaden the front of civil society actors involved in vaccination policies;
- support the "Life-course immunization approach" for all the vaccine-preventable diseases both towards political interlocutors and towards citizenship;
- provide decision-makers and relevant stakeholders involved in the definition and implementation of vaccination policies with a civic point of view that complements the perspective of other qualified actors committed to the issue.

These are our standing points on the subject, and the building of alliances and the dialogue with institutions from a multi-stakeholder perspective are well-established features of our way of operating.

Well, talking about today's initiative, the title we have chosen may seem provocative, and the message that the title itself implies might appear low-profile if we keep in mind the dynamics at the international and European levels.

Taking into consideration the priorities of the Czech Presidency of the Council of the European Union (managing the refugee crisis and Ukraine's post-war recovery, energy security, strengthening Europe's defence capabilities and cyberspace security, strategic resilience of the European economy and resilience of democratic institutions) apparently there is no space for the value of immunization, and the only time we read about vaccines in official documents is exclusively to extend the model of purchasing vaccines for gas reserves, "the promotion of voluntary joint purchases in a way similar to the purchase of vaccines"¹.

Also, the current dynamics on vaccination public policy seem to be far away from the topic we have chosen to discuss about today. I refer, for example:

- 1) To the work of the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC), which has just developed an e-learning course, to which moreover we were honored to be invited in its definition phase, to counter another virus that grips our society, namely that of misinformation². The training course will provide public health and communication experts with strategies, knowledge, and hands-on skills to recognise, monitor and increase capacity to address online vaccine misinformation. It's designed for public health practitioners and risk communication experts at the national, regional and local level in the EU³.
- 2) I refer, in general, to the commitment at the European level of the three Council Presidencies (France, Czech Rep., Sweden) to promote the strengthening of health policies, including by focusing on measures for disease prevention, and in particular their work to ensure the availability of COVID-19 vaccines and at the same time to promote the EU's resilience through global solidarity, and a significant EU contribution to global recovery and sharing of vaccines.
- 3) I refer, in particular, to the news that governments at the World Trade Organization (WTO) have agreed last June 17, a deal on patents for COVID-19 vaccines in developing countries, noting the exceptional circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic, and recognizing the importance of the timely availability of and access to COVID-19 vaccines⁴. A request that had been made by the

¹ https://czech-presidency.consilium.europa.eu/media/fk3pihaw/eng_priorities.pdf

² <https://eva.ecdc.europa.eu/enrol/index.php?id=603>

³ <https://eva.ecdc.europa.eu/mod/forum/discuss.php?d=2821>

⁴ <https://docs.wto.org/dol2fe/Pages/SS/directdoc.aspx?filename=q:/WT/MIN22/W15R1.pdf&Open=True>

European Parliament as early as June 2021, a request especially long and loudly promoted by NGOs, humanitarian and development cooperation organizations. A ~~decisive~~ step forward from the timid openings "to work toward enhancing timely, equitable and global access to vaccines" that we had recorded at the Global Health Summit last May 2021 and the subsequent G20 Rome Declaration last October 2021.

For the avoidance of doubt, we welcome advancement on the "EU strategy on vaccine solidarity" and we are absolutely in favor of such outcomes. That said, there is still a feeling from many quarters that the focus on the so-called routine vaccinations, with particular reference to adult vaccination, is still weak, and never considered a priority. We are, in short, unfortunately still a long way from establishing a life course immunization culture among the whole population across Europe.

As far as it regards us, what I am going to state is not just a simple concern but rather the result of a series of indicators and data that we have picked up from our civic observatory on vaccination policies from the citizens' point of view. And even if all of them come from a national level, I think they are useful for a more global reflection. Indeed:

- A. As you can imagine, the pandemic has extended the waiting list also for routine vaccinations. In my country, Italy, for instance, according to our recent survey, from March 2020 to December 2021, in 40% of the 147 vaccination centers monitored, both opening hours and dedicated staff were reduced compared to the pre-pandemic situation.
- B. In terms of vaccinations recommended for the same target (ex. Meningococcal ACWY vaccine and HPV in the adolescent population, or Pneumococcus and Zoster in the adult / elderly population) free of charge is guaranteed in Italy when carried out in the recommended age range, while if you go beyond that range, in some cases you have to pay, in others no.
- C. In the monitoring of the routine vaccinations' coverage, data are collected regularly only for flu vaccination.
- D. 63% of the 2990 citizens & chronic patients interviewed are in favor of confirming the SARS-CoV-2 vaccination service in the pharmacy beyond the current pilot phase, and 65% of them agree about the opportunity to extend in Italy the involvement of the pharmacist also for routine vaccinations (flu, zoster and pneumococcal vaccination).

E. In the 2021-2022 winter season, among those interviewed by my organization in Italy, one in two citizens reported not having received pneumococcal vaccination, either at the same time as the flu shot, or at different times. Among the main reasons: it was not proposed to me (62.7%), and I have no idea what it is (17.9%). By crossing the figure between those who did not receive pneumococcal vaccination (52.3%) and the 65-70 age group, 34.5% reported to have been contacted only for the flu shot and Covid-19 vaccination. Only 1.8% of those eligible to the vaccination received an official communication from the ASL (Italian Local Health Authority Unit) inviting them to receive pneumococcal vaccination. The Covid-19 pandemic has recorded a decline in vaccinations across all age groups; data on vaccination coverage in adults and at-risk groups are not systematically collected, unlike what happens for vaccinations in childhood and adolescence and flu shots. In this context, the offer of pneumococcal vaccination in Italy, which is also part of the LEA ('Essential Levels of Assistance' according to the Italian NHS) as a recommended and free vaccination, has considerable regional differences in its organization and delivery, with important repercussions on the right to a fair and equal access for all citizens.

In brief, talking about routine vaccinations, with particular attention to adult vaccination, we still need to overcome the side effect of the pandemic, to reduce health inequalities also in the area of vaccination as well as to implement definitely the temporary measures introduced in the emergency situation. We will discuss this today with experts and representatives of European institutions, whom I thank, starting with these questions:

- Will we be able to take a cue from the most rapid and extensive adult vaccination campaign, later extended to younger people, which was the Covid-19 vaccination campaign?
- We have a window of opportunity over the summer to take urgent action ahead of winter 2022/23 to invest in healthcare infrastructure and strengthen immunization programs for vaccine-preventable respiratory diseases (VPRDs) and COVID-19, to protect populations and healthcare systems. How consistent is the commitment of the institutions to balance Covid-19 and routine vaccinations?
 - The Conference of the Future of Europe, talking about the issue of immunization, has been a lost occasion, despite the commitment of some actors that have promoted initiatives and have provided suggestions on the topic (we have realized 2 ad hoc initiatives in [July 2021](#) and [November 2021](#) both hosted in the EU Portal FuturEU).

- Could the Council Conclusions, to be expected at the end of 2022, provide more attention on vaccination? We hope so, and for sure we'll be following the activities led by the Czech Presidency of the Council of the European Union, whom we invited to this event today and to whom we extend our best wishes for a successful work. We have appreciated that its programme on health policy between now and the end of the year wants to address vaccination among other "long term priorities in the field of health" such as EU pharmaceuticals rules, rare diseases, oncology, and the European Health data Space.

We believe that the focus on routine vaccinations, with emphasis on adult vaccinations, is not a rearguard battle, and that, on the contrary, it may be strategic to include it in the next Conclusions to emphasize to Member States a clear direction on the issue.

Finally, let me thank in advance all the panelists invited, in particular Martine Ingvorsen from DG Santè for providing us the EU Commission's perspective, and our usual moderator when we talk about vaccination policies: Gary Finnegan, who is Editor of Vaccines Today. In his country, Ireland, Gary has been the winner of the EU Health Prize for Journalism on three occasions and has won two Irish Medical Media Awards. So, he is the right person to chair our event today.

I wish you a fruitful webinar.