

## **Obstacles to equitable access to Covid-19 vaccines – and the part the UK government is playing in that**

### **Background**

Covid-19 vaccines are a crucial tool to end this pandemic. Our best chance of all staying safe is to ensure Covid-19 vaccines, tests and treatments are available for all. This will only be possible if pharmaceutical corporations and governments ensure that vaccines, tests and treatments are produced as widely as possible by sharing the science, know-how and technology free from monopolies on intellectual property. This means manufacturing doses in vast numbers in multiple places and distributing them fairly – regardless of the wealth of the recipient.

Academic research shows that we could avert 61 percent of deaths globally if vaccines are distributed fairly, compared to 31 percent if rich countries hoard vaccines.<sup>i</sup>

But instead of being produced as global public goods – manufactured in mass quantities, affordable to all countries and free to the public - supplies are restricted by intellectual property rules and rich countries are hoarding stocks by making bilateral deals with pharmaceutical companies.

Wealthy nations have bought up enough doses to vaccinate their entire populations nearly three times over by the end of 2021 if those currently in clinical trials are all approved for use. Data shows that rich nations representing just 14 per cent of the world's population have bought up 53 per cent of all the most promising vaccines so far.<sup>ii</sup> And some low-income countries could even be waiting up to 2024 before they get the vaccine.<sup>iii</sup>

All of Moderna's doses and 96 percent of Pfizer/BioNTech's have been acquired by rich countries. In welcome contrast Oxford/AstraZeneca has pledged to provide 64 percent of their doses to people in developing nations. Yet despite their actions to scale up supply they can still only reach 18 per cent of the world's population next year at most. No single corporation will ever be able to make enough vaccine doses quickly enough for everyone who needs one. People could be waiting for access for years or may never get one.

### **How global equitable access to Covid-19 vaccines could be improved or ensured**

#### **The Covid-19 Vaccine Global Access Facility**

The Covid-19 Vaccine Global Access (Covax) Facility is a global vaccine programme to enable countries to purchase vaccines collectively and distribute them equitably. Covax Advance Market Commitment (AMC) funds and delivers Covid-19 vaccines for 92 low-income countries. As things stand, the programme is only going to be able to provide enough vaccines to vaccinate around 20% of each country's population in 2021, and currently has no plan for how more doses will be acquired. This is nowhere near enough for each country to achieve herd immunity. In spite of its aspirations, Covax is fundamentally flawed because it does not challenge big pharma monopolies and will always struggle to purchase enough vaccines.

*The UK government has contributed \$1billion to help fund Covax but at the same time has undermined the scheme by setting up bilateral deals directly with pharmaceutical companies. The UK has so far pre-ordered seven different vaccines. With a total of 519 million doses purchased, that is around 7 doses per UK citizen.*

#### **Intellectual property and the WTO TRIPS waiver**

Evidence from the Covid-19 response so far shows how intellectual property (IP) rules have affected access to life saving products through high prices and production shortages – for example by reducing access to N95 respirator masks and ventilator valves during the current pandemic.

And of course for decades these rules have also made access to life saving treatments for AIDS, hepatitis C, cystic fibrosis, a range of cancers and many other diseases more difficult.

On 2 October 2020, South Africa and India submitted a joint proposal to the TRIPS (Trade Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights) Council at the World Trade Organisation titled “Waiver from certain provisions of the TRIPS agreement for the prevention, containment and treatment of COVID-19”.<sup>iv</sup> The aim of the Waiver is to allow all countries to be able to choose to not implement, apply or enforce patents and other intellectual property related to Covid-19 treatments, vaccines, diagnostics and other health technologies until vaccination is in place globally and worldwide herd immunity is achieved.

The proposal has since been discussed again and is reported to be supported by just under 100 countries (the majority of which are least developed or developing countries).

*Nine countries have rejected the proposal – including the UK and the EU as a bloc.*<sup>v</sup>

### **The Covid-19 Technology Access Pool**

The Covid-19 Technology Access Pool (C-TAP) was set up by the WHO to compile, in one place, pledges of commitment made under the Solidarity Call to Action to voluntarily share Covid-19 health technology related knowledge, intellectual property and data. The hope is that shared knowledge, intellectual property and data will leverage collective efforts to advance science, technology development and broad sharing of the benefits of scientific advancement and its applications based on the right to health. There has been limited support for this, with only forty countries having endorsed the Solidarity Call to Action, and the majority of those being in the Global South.

*The UK has not added its name to the list of endorsers.*

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Global Justice Now is part of the People’s Vaccine Alliance