

Rich nations vaccinating one person every second while majority of the poorest nations are yet to give a single dose

US, UK and EU blocking proposals at WTO to help poorer countries get vaccines more quickly

One year on from the declaration of the COVID-19 pandemic, the People's Vaccine Alliance is warning that developing countries are facing critical shortages of oxygen and medical supplies to cope with COVID-19 cases yet the majority have been unable to administer a single dose of a COVID-19 vaccine. In contrast rich nations have vaccinated their citizens at a rate of one person per second over the last month.

Many of these rich nations, including the US, UK and EU, are blocking a proposal by over 100 developing countries to be discussed at the World Trade Organisation (WTO) today, which would override the monopolies held by pharmaceutical companies and allow an urgently needed scale up in the production of safe and effective COVID-19 vaccines to ensure poorer countries get access to the doses they desperately need.

While more poor countries will see the arrival of doses in the coming days from the World Health Organisation's COVAX facility, the amounts available mean only three per cent of people in those countries can hope to be vaccinated by mid-year, and only one fifth at best by the end of 2021.

Almost one million people worldwide have signed a call by the People's Vaccine Alliance – a group of campaigning organisations including Oxfam, Frontline AIDS, UNAIDS, Global Justice Now and the Yunus Centre – for rich nations to stop protecting big pharma monopolies and profits over people's lives. On 11 March protests will take place outside pharmaceutical headquarters as part of a global day of action by activists across the world.

Recent public opinion polls carried out by YouGov for the Alliance in the US, France, Germany and the UK found that on average, across these countries, more than two-thirds (69 per cent) of people thought that governments should ensure vaccine science and know-how is shared with qualified manufacturers around the world rather than remaining the exclusive property of a handful of pharmaceutical giants and that vaccine developers should be adequately compensated for this.

Oxfam International's Executive Director, Gabriela Bucher, said: "Around the world, two and a half million lives have already been lost due to this brutal disease and many countries are battling without adequate medical care and no vaccines. By allowing a small group of pharmaceutical companies to decide who lives and who dies, rich nations are prolonging this unprecedented global health emergency and putting countless more lives on the line. At this crucial time, developing countries need support – not opposition."

The Alliance warned that in South Africa, Malawi and other African nations history is in danger of repeating itself. Millions of people died in the early 2000's because pharmaceutical monopolies had priced successful treatments for HIV/AIDS out of reach at up to \$10,000 a year.

Lois Chingandu, activist and Director of Evidence and Influence at Frontline AIDS, said: "Here in Zimbabwe, I have lost many dear friends, struggling to breathe in their last moments. It is a cruel irony that activists who fought tirelessly for free medicines for HIV/AIDS are now being killed by COVID-19 because, yet again, pharma profits are being put ahead of people's lives."

Pharma monopolies were eventually overruled allowing the mass production of cheap effective treatment for those living with HIV/AIDS, meaning millions of people are alive today who would otherwise have perished.

On 10-11 March, more than 100 developing countries, led by South Africa and India will again make the case at the WTO for a waiver of Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property (TRIPS), which would remove legal barriers for more countries and manufacturers to produce the vaccines, protect their people and join the economic recovery ahead.

Nobel Laureate Professor Muhammad Yunus, one of the leaders of the People's Vaccine Alliance said: "For the rich world, this proposed act of human solidarity to ensure that medicines and vaccines get to the whole human family simultaneously is in their own self-interest, not just an act of charity.

"We should act now. There is no going back. It is totally unfair that rich countries, who have enough vaccines to protect their citizens, are blocking the TRIPS waiver, which could help poorer countries get the vaccines they need."

All the leading vaccine developers have benefited from billions of dollars in public subsidies, yet pharmaceutical corporations have been handed the monopoly rights to produce and profit from them.

At the same time qualified vaccine producers all over the world stand ready to produce more vaccines if they were allowed access to the technology and know-how now being held under lock and key by these companies. New capacity could be brought on stream within months. Suhaib Siddiqi, former director of chemistry at Moderna, producer of one of the first approved vaccines, said that with the blueprint and technical advice, a modern factory should be able to produce vaccines in at most three to four months.

France has called for the expansion of production in developing countries, and the US has moved to achieve the same domestically. But so far both countries continue to defend the monopolies of pharma corporations.

To control the virus, enough doses of vaccines need to be produced in different geographies, priced affordably, allocated globally and widely deployed for free in local communities. Thus far, the world is failing on all four fronts.

Winnie Byanyima, Executive Director UNAIDS, said: "Amid so much personal selflessness, sacrifice and heroism, the People's Vaccine Alliance denounces the hypocrisy, emptiness of human solidarity and myopic self-interest that defeats efforts to control the virus in countries. Only a truly global mobilization of vaccine production to rapidly scale-up the total number of low-cost doses available will get the job done."

Nick Dearden, Director of Global Justice Now, said: "One year into the global pandemic, it's an outrage that vaccine factories are lying idle, unable to produce COVID-19 vaccines because rich countries are prioritising the patents of pharmaceutical companies ahead of the lives of people across the world. A global suspension of patents is needed to speed up the production of these vaccines everywhere."

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