

Research Report

COMMITTEE : World health Organisation

ISSUE : *How to ensure global and equitable access to COVID-19 vaccines?*

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How to ensure global and equitable access to COVID-19 vaccines?

KEY WORDS

Coronavirus SARS-CoV-2 : virus from the coronaviridae family, responsible for the infectious respiratory disease called Covid-19, first identified in China in January 2020.

Vaccine : substance administered into the body - usually by injection - which aims to protect against viruses by introducing killed or attenuated forms of infectious agents to stimulate the body's immune response and create the necessary antibodies to fight the real disease.

There are 3 main types of vaccines:

- 1) **Live attenuated vaccines**, which contain disease causing pathogens but deprived of their infectious capacity, allowing a fairly effective protection against the targeted virus. However, this type of vaccine is not recommended for pregnant women or people with a weakened immune system;
- 2) **Inactivated vaccines**, which do not contain a live virus or bacterium but rather fractions of the deactivated infectious agent. This is the most commonly used method for vaccines;
- 3) **Messenger RNA vaccines**: this technique replicates the genetic code of the virus' antibody protein so that, once inserted in the body, the latter can promote the production of proteins and antigens allowing the immune system to quickly recognize and destroy the virus.

Vaccination : strategy aiming to protect the population by using vaccines to fight serious diseases. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, vaccination as a preventive measure was a highly controversial issue.

GAVI, *Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunisation* : international organization created by the WHO in January 2000 to address the issue of vaccination. It created the COVAX program in April 2020 to promote the equitable distribution of COVID vaccines on a global scale.

Global and equitable access : Granting the right to benefit from something - in this case, vaccines - at all levels, regional, national, or international, and regardless of the economic situation, political context, or social status of individuals.

OVERVIEW

In November 2019, the first coronavirus cases appeared in the Chinese city of Wuhan. Today, there are more than 240 million people who have contracted the disease, and the death toll exceeds 4 million deaths, numbers that will continue to rise if the global community doesn't intervene quickly to implement both short term and long-term solutions. While some countries are already preparing to offer a third vaccination dose to their citizens, other countries have not even started their vaccination strategies yet.

Covid-19 is a viral infection that affects all age groups, but manifests itself in various ways. A patient can be asymptomatic, which means they've contracted the disease but without manifesting any outward signs. The virus can also be perceived as only a mild sickness, such as a simple cold or a temporary flu; and in the most serious cases, for patients presenting immunal or respiratory deficiencies, the virus tends to exacerbate pre-existing medical conditions, causing more severe respiratory disorders that can often prove to be fatal.

1) Vaccination policies, the only real solution?

The ease with which the virus spreads from one individual to another has led to long-lasting and devastating social, economic and political impacts, prompting many countries to adopt more or less radical preventive measures, such as quarantine, confinement, border closures, curfews, etc. Although these measures help to slow down the spread of the disease, serious economic and social consequences will continue to arise as long as the virus isn't fully eradicated. In order to do so, it is therefore important to implement long term solutions, and the international community has turned to medical experts and pharmaceutical industries for help and advice.

To date, no conventional chemical drug is able to fully cure or prevent the virus. Medication such as paracetamol can help limit its unpleasant effects, but the only effective preventive treatment against COVID-19 is vaccination: it allows individuals to protect themselves whilst simultaneously reducing the virus' chances of spreading to others. For this reason, governments alongside private investors have encouraged and financed the development, purchase and distribution of vaccines.

2) Main challenges and inequalities

As vaccine production increases, inequalities accumulate as well. As of May 2021, 75% of all vaccine doses had been administered in only 10 countries. Higher income countries are not

only able to produce the vaccines, but also purchase them quickly and distribute them to their own populations without much difficulty. Pursuing national self-interests, some countries such as India have even tried to block vaccine exports abroad. So even if lower income countries such as some in Africa or Asia had sufficient funding to buy the necessary doses, they would still have to deal with governmental measures restricting vaccine exportations abroad. Another major problem is the transportation and storage of vaccines, which both require specialized and costly infrastructures, such as adequate roads, adapted vehicles and freezers. Many countries are currently unable to properly distribute vaccine doses to all their citizens, especially those living in rural areas, and then provide the necessary preservation means for them. Finally, a shortage of health care personnel to properly administer vaccines and a lack supporting medical and technical equipment such as syringes or computers, is a serious hindrance as well.

In addition to these material and technical problems, the attitudes of certain governments and individuals can be a major obstacle to immunisation. Certain political or other influential figures contribute to the spread of misinformation regarding vaccines and discourage their fellow citizens from getting vaccinated. In Tanzania, for example, the country's Health Minister held a press conference denying the vaccine's positive results and instead promoted a vegetable smoothie that was supposed to fight the virus. This refusal to recognize the importance of vaccines and the tendency to condemn the entire vaccination process is slowing down the fight against the pandemic.

3) A major global issue

Our highly globalized and interconnected world requires vaccination on a global scale for vaccination measures to be truly successful. If only a few citizens of certain countries are vaccinated, it will be difficult to keep borders open for travel or trade, both of which are essential to the economic well-being of many countries.

"No one is safe from COVID-19 until the entire world is safe."

- Volkan Bozkır, President of the United Nations General Assembly

In partnership with the WHO, the NGO GAVI established the COVAX program, which to date remains the only global initiative working with States and manufacturers alike to ensure the availability of Covid vaccines worldwide. According to the latest data, COVAX has already shipped more than 236 million doses to 139 program participants, and continues to build on support from States and donor foundations to ensure equitable vaccine procurement and distribution. But the platform still faces many challenges, such as vaccine export controls in some countries, inaccessible locations, insufficient funding, and competition from States that favor direct agreements with pharmaceutical companies instead of a more cooperative approach.

RELEVANT UN TREATIES AND EVENTS

25/01/2008

Global Immunisation Strategy - World Health Assembly

This strategy aims to expand access to new vaccines whilst monitoring the population for potential side effects. The Assembly stresses the importance of working with international partners and donors to ensure the proper distribution of vaccines as well as setting an affordable price for all countries, especially low-income countries. It also calls on the international community to further research, development and regulatory measures in the field of vaccines, particularly for developing countries.

21/02/2013

Global vaccine action plan 2011-2020 - WHO

In May 2012, the World Health Assembly and 194 countries came together to implement a global vaccine action plan to reduce the number of deaths linked to curable or preventable diseases. The plan is based on six principles, namely: Country ownership, Shared responsibility and partnerships, Equity, Integration, Sustainability and Innovation. In practical terms, immunisation is an important component of the right to health, so it is important that people are informed about immunisation and that governments provide effective immunisation services. For its implementation, it is necessary to ensure good organisation and financial management.

26/02/2021

Resolution on equitable distribution of COVID-19 vaccines - UN Security Council

In February 2021, the Security Council gathered to address the issue of global immunisation. Aware of the humanitarian conflicts and the varying degrees of inequality between countries, a resolution was drafted and ratified to find solutions to obstacles that slow down the fight against Covid-19. Specifically, it was proposed that no country should stockpile vaccines, but that all vaccines produced should be available for immediate use; that all health systems should be optimised; and that parties engaged in armed conflict should sign a ceasefire to facilitate the safe transport and distribution of vaccines.

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

In order to ensure global, rapid and efficient vaccine production and distribution, cooperation between States and international organisations must be promoted, on financial, technical and material levels.

Favoring an adapted and efficient distribution

- Establish a collective management of vaccination policies to allow for a proportional distribution of vaccines in relation to the number of a country's inhabitants.
- Prioritize immunisation for essential medical personnel, as well as for people in poor health or advanced in age.
- Take advantage of existing multilateral architecture, particularly COVAX, to strengthen supply chains and expand global vaccine delivery capacity.
- Encourage partnerships with companies such as DHL, FedEx and UPS, which are well equipped to meet cold chain transport requirements in a safe and timely manner.

Building trust and cooperation

- In order to counteract fake news and promote public confidence in vaccines, a possible solution is to conduct awareness campaigns in schools, public places, on social media etc. so that the population is fully aware of the health situation, the exact functioning of vaccines, as well as the urgent need to get vaccinated.

Promote research, production and distribution

- Harmonise the fight against COVID-19 by pooling together the efforts of all laboratories internationally to increase knowledge related to the virus and better anticipate future pandemics.
- Ensure that outdated policies, such as those related to trade, taxation and customs, do not slow down or prevent global distribution.
- Another possibility would be to adapt laws protecting the intellectual property of vaccines: models of intellectual property exploitation based on sharing, rather than control, can be encouraged, for example. Another possibility would be to amend patent laws to protect the technology required for developing or producing the mRNA vaccine, rather than the product itself (the vaccine).

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