

No one is safe until we're all safe: Why the world needs a TRIPS waiver now

Whilst the richest countries have been vaccinating one person per second and are now rolling out booster shots, over 98% of people in low-income countries have yet to receive a single dose.^[1] The result is a deadly surge in the pandemic in the Global South.

Transport workers have been put at particular risk. One UK study showed they were twice as likely to suffer severe infection as non-essential workers, while another found bus drivers were nearly three times more likely to die of Covid-19.^[2] A study in Latin America put transportation and market workers at 40-50% of confirmed Covid-19 cases.^[3]

Beyond the health risks, the pandemic has seriously impacted the welfare of key transport workers travelling across international borders. At the start of the year, for example, an estimated 400,000 seafarers were left stranded working on ships, long past the expiry of their contracts and unable to be repatriated.^[4]

We need **urgent action** to get populations across the world vaccinated, and infections diagnosed and treated, as quickly as possible. **No one is safe until we are all safe.** If the world is to move past the pandemic, it is crucial that all barriers are removed from getting the women and men who keep the world moving vaccinated as quickly as possible. A key step to help achieve this is the TRIPS waiver.

What is TRIPS?

TRIPS is a World Trade Organization (WTO) agreement which protects patents and other intellectual property internationally. When, for example, a company like Pfizer or Moderna produces a vaccine, TRIPS blocks anyone else from using, adapting, manufacturing, scaling up or supplying that vaccine.^[5]

It prevents any actions which could undercut the developer company's ability to profit from these tools. Effectively, this means that a handful of companies decide who does and does not get protection from Covid-19, and on what terms.

What is the "TRIPS waiver", and what stage is it at?

Right now, the world is not manufacturing and supplying enough vaccines to go around. Countries are also running out of life saving supplies of PPE, medication, therapeutics, diagnostics and other products, leading to countless avoidable deaths. In many cases, it is not Covid-19 but the inability to offer timely care that is leading to high death rates, especially in the Global South. Intellectual property restrictions are a big part of the problem.^[6]

That's why, in October 2020, South Africa and India submitted a proposal to the WTO asking for a temporary waiver on key intellectual property protections.^[7] Their proposal has gained widespread support, including from the USA, and is now co-sponsored by over 60 WTO countries. However, a tiny handful of rich countries continue to block the move. Key voices blocking the waiver are: Germany and the EU, Switzerland and the United Kingdom.^[8]

How will the TRIPS waiver save lives?

The TRIPS waiver would help protect and treat people around the world from the pandemic by:

- 1. Opening up access to vaccines:** The waiver would enable vaccines to be manufactured more widely. Sharing data, such as clinical trials, could support innovation too, including the development of lower cost vaccines.
- 2. Lifting restrictions on treatment, production and supply:** Vaccines are just part of the problem. Lifting restrictions over patents, copyright, trade secrets and design will be crucial if we are to scale up the number of people being vaccinated, tested and treated across the world.

A global approach to a global pandemic

The TRIPS waiver would remove a major block to ramping up production and supply of Covid-19 vaccines. And that's desperately needed.

Wealthy countries like the US, UK, Germany and Israel have fully vaccinated the majority of their populations.^[9] However, populations in much of the Global South are being left behind. The current explosion in cases in these countries is putting health systems under risk of collapse, as well as potentially leading to the emergence of more deadly or contagious variants.^[10] Making more vaccines accessible to more people quickly is essential to saving lives world-wide and making us all safer.

What does a lack of global vaccine access mean for recovery, jobs and livelihoods?

The continuing risks to transport workers have wider impacts for our communities, the wider population and the global economy too. Global supply chains depend on the seafarers and aircrew who can transport the goods we all need. Without equitable access to vaccines, we cannot make the global supply chains we depend on for food and daily living safe.

Economists have described the unequal distribution of vaccines a "significant risk to an already uneven and fragile global recovery."^[11] The OECD forecasts that lack of vaccines could lower severely impact economic growth for years to come.^[12] And, the Economist Intelligence Unit has estimated that the cost of a slow vaccine rollout at \$2.3 trillion in lost GDP for the countries being left behind.^[13] Vaccine inequity is among the greatest global risks to jobs and livelihoods as the world looks to exit the pandemic.

A TRIPS waiver would not only end the moral and economic disaster of the unequal vaccine rollout, it would also allow the world to more quickly create and distribute boosters and new vaccines to counter emerging variants.

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