**COVID 19 vaccine for all**

[Frank F Islam](https://dailytimes.com.pk/writer/frank-f-islam/)

December 24, 2020

With the Covid-19 caseload reaching a new peak around the globe in the beginning of December, there was a sigh of relief on December 8 when the rollout of a coronavirus vaccine developed by American drug manufacture Pfizer and Germany’s BioNTech (Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine) began in the United Kingdom’s 50 hospital hubs as part of the largest immunization program in British History.

On December 11, the United States Food and Drug Administration authorized emergency use of the same vaccine to halt the pandemic march in the U.S. which has already killed more than 300,000 Americans. The first doses were administered beginning on December 14 It is heartening to see the launch of the vaccine roll-out. It is disturbing, on the other hand, to hear the warning from a group of organizations calling themselves The People’s Vaccine Alliance (Alliance) that, unless there is collective corrective action by governments and the pharmaceutical industry, in nearly 70 poor countries only 1-in-10 people will be vaccinated in 2021.

The Alliance is comprised of Amnesty International, Frontline Aids, Global Justice Now and Oxfam. Drawing upon data collected by science information and analytics firm Airfinity of deals made by countries with the eight leading manufacturers of potentially useful vaccines, the Alliance found 67 low and lower middle-income countries are at high risk of an inadequate response to the pandemic while richer countries are positioned quite well.

Pakistan is aligned with Gavi, the global vaccine alliance, through which it hopes to receive free COVID-19 vaccine doses. Dr. Malik Mohammad Safi, director general for health at the Ministry of National Health Services, is reported as saying that the vaccine from Gavi will immunize 20 percent of the Pakistan population

The Alliance pointed out that while those poorer countries will only be able to vaccinate 1 in 10 next year, “…wealthier nations have bought up enough doses to vaccinate their entire population nearly three times over by the end of 2021 if those currently in clinical trials are all approved for use.” This situation should be ethically and morally unacceptable. As Anna Marriott, Oxfam’s Health Policy Manager, states:

“No one should be blocked from getting a life-saving vaccine because of the country they live in or the amount of money in their pocket. But unless something changes dramatically, billions of people around the world will not receive a safe and effective vaccine for COVID-19 for years to come.”

In its announcement warning of the covid-19 supply problem, the Alliance highlighted that there were more than 1.5 million positive coronavirus cases in five countries: Kenya, Myanmar, Nigeria, Ukraine and Pakistan.

Here is where Pakistan stands today in terms of the impact of and dealing with the covid-19 pandemic.

As of December 15,2020, there have been a total of 443,246 positive cases and 8,905 deaths attributed to the pandemic.

Plans are being prepared in Pakistan and progress is underway for the rollout of the vaccine to address this condition. From reports, it appears that the rollout will begin in the first quarter of 2021 and accelerate in the second.

As in the U. K’s vaccination campaign, the first priority will be the most vulnerable groups including front line health care workers and older people. One of the key issues to be addressed to ensure a successful roll-out in Pakistan will be putting the right infrastructure and distribution system in place to reach every nook and cranny of the densely populated country Pakistan had originally allocated a fund of $150 million to purchase the corona vaccine. Parliamentary Secretary of National Health Services Nausheen Hamid recently advised the media that “The allocation for vaccine purchase had been enhanced to $250 million.”

According to the Parliamentary Secretary Hamid, Pakistan “Will sign a purchase agreement with more than one company to ensure that we get a vaccine”. The vaccines could come from a number of sources and countries including the U.S., Russia, and China.

Pakistan is working on multiple fronts to secure the financial support and the international cooperation and assistance which will be essential over the upcoming months to secure an adequate supply of Covid-19 vaccines. It is reported that Pakistan has requested funding from the World Bank of $153 million for advance purchase of the vaccines.

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And, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) has approved a $9 billion Covid-scheme to assist member states in purchasing vaccines. Pakistan will likely to get a boost from ADB’s funding in purchasing vaccines.

The covid-19 global pandemic is an unprecedented health care crisis for Pakistan and all the countries of the world. It has caused considerable stress and strain in even the most advanced nations. As the People’s Vaccine Alliance has emphasized, it will be especially problematic for the low and lower-middle income countries going forward.

The pandemic puts a spotlight on the need for and importance of strong national health care systems.

The short-term need is to combat and defeat covid-19. The longer-term solution must be to upgrade the capacity and competence of a country’s health care system to prevent and enable rapid responses  to health care crises.

One of the things that Pakistan and other similarly situated countries can do to accomplish this is to invest, promote and develop research facilities and human resource capabilities (HR) in biotechnology and related fields.

Pakistan currently is deficient in areas such as stem cell research, vaccines, DNA, and high technology that are necessary for self-sufficiency in the fields of medicine and biotechnology. This is true on the HR side as well Pakistan has several good institutions currently working on various aspects of biotechnology. This is not the case, however, in terms of human resources. HR is an area where there is need for considerable improvement.

Academia, industry and others in Pakistan need to form partnerships and reach out to experts around the world to put a process in place to bring its HR practices up to international standards. This will ensure that Pakistani practitioners have the knowledge, skills, abilities and access to the information and resources they need to provide high quality medical services.

In closing, this covid-19 global pandemic has united the countries of the world in their suffering. The need now is to turn that suffering into a pivot point to provide all of the people of the world with access to a covid-19 vaccine in the near term and access to world class health care as quickly as possible in the future.

*Frank F. Islam is an Entrepreneur, Civic Leader, and Thought Leader based in Washington DC. The views expressed here are personal*