**Global Covid-19 response**

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Politicians in rich countries are trying to ‘move on’ from the pandemic; to manipulate the emotional fatigue of the public and tell them what they want to hear: that this pandemic is over. They want to pretend that Covid-19 is a problem of the past – a problem for poorer countries. That notion is as reckless as it is false.

With tens of thousands of new coronavirus deaths and infections in low and middle-income countries each day, the pandemic is far from over for the global south. The true Covid-19 death toll in lower-income countries is four times higher than in rich nations. These are not abstract statistics, these are our friends, our relatives, our loved ones. To say that we are in a ‘post-Covid’ era is to erase their deaths.

After a brutal 22-month lockdown, schools in Uganda are finally reopening. While they have been closed, many school-age girls have married and had children. In the first 18 months of the pandemic, some 650,000 teenage girls became pregnant in Uganda. Many will never return to education. For their sake, the reopening of societies in the global south is essential.

However, removing restrictions will hasten the spread of Covid-19 among unvaccinated populations. And, as scientists have repeatedly warned, each infection poses the risk of new variants of concern that could threaten our remarkable progress in battling the virus. That, in turn, could prolong the pandemic and all of its associated suffering.

We have heard the well-rehearsed line that “no one is safe until everyone is safe” from leaders in the global north. Yet, after two years, we have seen little evidence that they are serious. At regular intervals, wealthy governments push out press releases announcing donations of millions of doses of COVID-19 vaccines. However, they fail to mention that dose donations are sporadic, sometimes close to expiry, and do not correspond to the needs of low and middle-income countries.

Like many of the world’s crises, we would be in a better place in this pandemic had we listened to the countries most affected by vaccine inequity. There remains a huge untapped capacity to manufacture Covid-19 vaccines, tests, and treatments in the global south. At least 120 unused facilities are capable of making mRNA vaccines.

And why those producers are not helping us to end the pandemic? Because rich countries have let pharmaceutical companies lock the recipes behind a wall of patents and trade secrets, all to protect the rights of billionaire CEOs to bring in eye-watering profits.

There have been remarkable efforts by low and middle-income countries to break these monopolies and gain access to the tools needed to fight COVID-19. In South Africa, a WHO-led consortium of manufacturers has successfully developed a version of the mRNA Covid-19 vaccine that was first sequenced by Moderna and the US National Institute of Health with a phenomenal injection of public funding.

To the credit of the US government, they have now shared the publicly-owned aspects of this technology with the WHO. Moderna, however, has refused. The company has even filed patents in South Africa, despite a public pledge that it would not enforce patents on its Covid-19 vaccine.

The WHO plans to use mRNA technology as a base for manufacturing vaccines against other diseases, building long-term health sovereignty in Africa. But Moderna’s patents could derail the project entirely.

It is little wonder that low and middle-income countries have sought to suspend patents and other intellectual property rules on Covid-19 vaccines, treatments, and associated technologies. In October 2020, South Africa and India proposed a temporary waiver of a global intellectual property agreement at the World Trade Organisation (WTO) for these tools. As the world has realised the sheer barrier these rules pose, the United States, Australia, and more than 100 nations have pledged their support for a waiver.

Excerpted: ‘Two years on, complacency still plagues global Covid-19 response’.

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