**Vaccine apartheid**

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China is all set to give one billion vaccine doses to African countries as part of its large-scale cooperation with the African continent. Given that the new Covid-19 variant ‘Omicron’ has emerged from Africa, I started to read up on ‘vaccine apartheid’ imposed by Western countries on the rest of the world. There is damning evidence against the West of hoarding vaccines and starving the developing world, particularly Africa, of it.

Another reason why I looked up vaccine apartheid is how normalised discussions around booster shots have become. It is ‘obscene’ to express the need to get the booster shot of a vaccine when billions in the world have not even got their first vaccine doses. Even in Pakistan, we still have to inoculate a majority of the population with full vaccination, and the NCOC should not be rolling out booster vaccines for the ‘haves’ until everyone in the country is fully vaccinated.

Getting booster vaccines is not only selfish but also defies the logic of science. Unless everyone is vaccinated, new variants of the coronavirus will keep emerging as the virus will keep mutating amongst the unvaccinated population in particular. How many booster vaccines will the world’s ‘haves’ keep getting? Why not end this vaccine apartheid and get everyone vaccinated, so that it minimises the chances of virus mutation.

According to a recent Public Citizen document, “37.5 million people have received a booster dose in the US. That exceeds the number of people who have gotten a single Covid-19 vaccine dose in eight Southern African countries…Since the start of the pandemic, the US has sent 11.2 million doses to those eight countries in Southern Africa. That is less than what the US distributed at home in one week in November (Nov 17-24).” This is a true reflection of vaccine apartheid.

In May, the new US administration seemingly backed a move to waive off the Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) to end the intellectual property protection of the big pharma and to facilitate the process of the production of Covid-19 vaccines in large quantities and cheaply.

However, as a November 9 Foreign Policy article highlights, six months down the line, the TRIPS waiver has not materialised due to the Eurpean Union’s (EU’s) opposition. Some reports suggest that Britain and Germany are in principle opposing the waiver along with the pharmaceutical industry and causing millions to die in developing countries due to supply constraints. India, South Africa, and Brazil were pushing for the TRIPS waiver on international forums, but they have not succeeded so far.

The literature also points out that the donated vaccine delivery mechanism of COVAX has not largely delivered it for developing countries. By the year-end, COVAX was supposed to provide two billion doses of vaccines to the developing world, and it only delivered 319 million vaccines.

In some countries, vaccines were provided so late that they had to be destroyed or returned. COVAX relied on India for its supply, and while India dealt with its deadly second wave, it transferred vaccines supplies internally to the country rather than exporting them. The whole multilateral mechanism of vaccines did not work largely for developing countries.

A Foreign Policy article also reports based on a private firm’s – Airfinity’s – information that “without redistribution, G-7 nations could waste 241 million doses by the end of 2021. The United States’ four national pharmacy chains – Walgreens, CVS Pharmacy, Walmart, and Rite Aid – alone have reported more than one million wasted doses each, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.” This is when the rate of the fully vaccinated in Western countries is edging towards a hundred percent while only six percent of the population in Africa has been vaccinated. In the Subcontinent, the rate of vaccination in India and Pakistan is between 20 and 30 percent.

An openDemocracy article, published on December 2, calls the vaccine apartheid “yet another expression of a colonialist mindset”. Apparently, a Britain’s Africa minister has blamed vaccine hesitancy in Africa for its low vaccination coverage. This is far from reality as most Africans want the vaccine. There is a racial tone to the debate.

Nick Dearden, in his article for Aljazeera’s September 30 issue, has compared the surplus of vaccines in the Western world at a time when the Global South is starved of them to the Indian famines of the 19th century under the British Empire where – according to Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen – the problem was not the lack of food but the policies of the Empire that led to it.

What is needed is not to redistribute the vaccine ‘leftovers’ to the developing world through COVAX; instead, make sure that the TRIPS waiver takes place and the technology required to make vaccines is freely available so that developing countries can manufacture their vaccines and save millions of lives that are being lost – or are at risk – due to the unavailability of Covid-19 vaccines.

Humanity is together in facing the pandemic. It is going to swim or sink together. The earlier Western countries imbibe this message, the better it is. Only genuine multilateralism will win this war. It is time to act on this message in Pakistan as well. The government and the opposition lack a strategy for the egalitarian use of the available stock of vaccines in Pakistan. The aim should be to vaccinate a maximum percentage of the population rather than prioritising giving booster shots to the privileged again.

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