

The Pandemic is Not Over: A COVID-19 Vaccine Equity Conference

2nd June 2022



Two years into the COVID-19 pandemic, huge levels of vaccine inequity persist. Just 13% of people in low-income countries have received two doses, compared to 75% of people in high-income countries. Less than 1% of people in low-income countries are boosted, compared to over 60% of people in Ireland. Moreover, COVID-19 therapeutics, remain out of reach of the poor. The lack of access to vaccines and therapeutics has translated into huge numbers of deaths: over three million COVID-19 deaths have occurred since the Omicron variant emerged, the majority of which occurred in low- and middle-income countries.

The People's Vaccine Alliance and The Irish Global Health Network hosted a live event with speakers from around the world advocating for a waiver of intellectual property rights on COVID-19 vaccines, therapeutics and diagnostics (TRIPS waiver). The speakers outlined the flaws in the EU's proposed alternative to the TRIPS waiver, the gross misconduct of governments and pharmaceutical companies, as well as detailing the history of inequality in access to medicines.

Speakers from the Seanad, Just Treatment, the Health Justice Initiative, Medecins Sans Frontiers, and the London School of Economics spoke at the live web event on June 2, 2022. Over 70 live attendees participated in the event with a further 600 views online. The event was moderated by Susan Smith, Professor of General Practice at Trinity College Dublin. You can watch the full event [here](#).

SUMMARY OF KEY MESSAGES

SENATOR ALICE-MARY HIGGINS, LEADER OF THE CIVIL ENGAGEMENT GROUP IN THE SEANAD



"The WHO, the European Parliament, over 100 countries, the Seanad, and the Irish Enterprise and Foreign Affairs Committees supported a TRIPS waiver, yet it has been blocked. Each month a small number of companies were making massive profits while millions of lives were unnecessarily lost."

Despite widespread support for the sharing of COVID-19 technologies, a few governments and the European Commission remain opposed.

- There is a large amount of vaccine manufacturing available in low- and middle- income countries in the global south.
- The charity model of vaccine donations failed because insufficient supplies were sent, deliveries were inconsistent, and doses were sometimes near expiry when sent; all of which led to increased vaccine hesitancy.
- The EU's relationships with many countries are being damaged by their opposition to the TRIPS waiver. This will have knock-on effects for many areas (e.g. climate change).
- A change to the systems of research and development is needed to ensure we can address future crises. This would mean investing in public-public partnerships instead of outsourcing to private companies.

CANDICE SEHOMA, MÉDECINS SANS FRONTIÈRES ACCESS CAMPAIGN ADVOCACY COORDINATOR



"In Africa we have shown that we have the capacity to produce for ourselves, and the TRIPS waiver would enable us to move forward and be able to better respond to the pandemic"

- There is both the willingness and the capacity to produce COVID-19 vaccines, therapeutics and diagnostics in Africa. However, high income countries need to facilitate this by passing the original TRIPS waiver.

- The alternative proposal to the TRIPS waiver does not include therapeutics or diagnostics despite their importance for preventing death in low-income countries.
- Waiving patents can drastically reduce the cost of accessing COVID-19 vaccines and therapeutics for people in low- and middle-income countries.

DR. LUKE MCDONAGH IS AN ASSISTANT PROFESSOR AT THE LONDON SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS



“One of the apparent aims of the TRIPS agreement was to spur technology transfer but of course, it has ended up supporting the economic model of high-income countries”

- The BioNTech, Moderna, and AstraZeneca vaccines all have their roots in public funding and in inventions that took place at public institutions.
- Prior to the 1994 TRIPS agreement, low- and middle-income countries could more easily copy technologies in order to develop their own innovative capacity.
- The EU's alternative to the TRIPS waiver, is considered flawed and too narrow to increase vaccine and treatment access in low- and middle-income countries.
- The HIV/AIDS epidemic has shown us that it's untrue and ahistorical to say that the TRIPS waiver will kill the incentives for innovation.

FATIMA HASSAN IS A LAWYER AND FOUNDER OF THE HEALTH JUSTICE INITIATIVE



“The world has accepted and whitewashed a system where it's okay for a 75 year old person in Ireland to get access to a vaccine before a 75 year old person living in Africa”

- ‘Gross extraction’ is taking place, in relation to COVID-19 vaccines and therapeutics, and there are four strands to it: 1) knowledge, 2) excessive profit, 3) trial participation, and 4) contractual concessions.
- Pharmaceutical companies have been using publicly funded research for private gain without recognition of public scientists or government funding.
- Trial participation is being extracted as Africans are being used for several clinical trials without affordable access to the respective vaccine post-trial.
- Contracts signed in Africa for COVID-19 vaccines often include full indemnification for the company, price secrecy and unlimited exports out of the respective country.

DIARMAID MCDONALD IS A SHUTTLEWORTH FELLOW AND FOUNDER OF JUST TREATMENT, UK



“We need to make politicians aware of their personal culpability for the unnecessary deaths of black and brown people around the world.”

- The pharmaceutical industry spends large amounts to influence governments which has led to corruption around decision making on access to medicines.
- The pandemic presents an opportunity to reassess how we structure the development of medicines; the current rules work in favour of high-income countries.
- There have been four times as many deaths from COVID-19 in low-income countries as there has been in high-income countries.
- Relaxation of intellectual property protections has worked in past health global health crises and evidence suggests it could contribute to solving this crisis today