

Independent Scientific Advocacy Group

PRESS RELEASE – GLOBAL VACCINE EQUITY - FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE – 20 MAY 2021

A Global Pandemic Calls For Global Solutions

Every crisis presents solutions and with those solutions come opportunities to do better than before. As much of the world has learned the hard way, the SARS-CoV-2 virus that causes Covid-19 disease does not respect nation state borders, and nor can our attempts to minimise its destruction whether by elimination or aggressive suppression with vaccine strategies. Maintaining vaccine scarcity, rather than equity, could mean that Covid-19 may not be brought under control for years.

This week, as the variant first identified in India exacted such a tragic toll in India and took hold in the UK, The Irish government, along with governments around the globe are considering the waiver of Trade Related Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS Waiver) for the vaccines that protect against Covid-19.

"Leaving low-income countries, some of which are the hardest hit by resurging waves of the virus, dependant on handouts and leftovers will not remedy the pandemic. We have the tools to overcome Covid-19 – now, let's share them. This is after all a global health emergency," said Oxfam Ireland CEO, Jim Clarken speaking at an event hosted by the Independent Scientific Advocacy Group.

The aim of the TRIPS waiver is to increase production of vaccines, making them available to as many people around the globe in as short a timeframe as possible in order to reduce not only the virus death toll, but the evolution and spread of new variants that these vaccines may not work for, leading to more deaths and longer and harsher restrictions.

Noting that the Tánaiste, Leo Varadkar, recently opined that developing countries lacked the capacity and expertise to produce vaccines that protect against Covid-19, Jim Clarken spoke about how we cannot repeat the world's failure to deal with the HIV/AIDS pandemic, *"It is disappointing that such evidence-free statements about production capacity in the global south, (last used during the HIV/AIDS crisis two decades ago), are being recycled by our leaders. We must remember that during the HIV/AIDS pandemic, affordable treatment was denied to people with HIV in poorer nations and that millions died needlessly as a result."*

"There are already manufacturers making safe and effective Covid-19 vaccines and medicines in South Africa, India, and Brazil and there is plenty more qualified capacity that we can draw on from Bangladesh to Senegal to Vietnam. It's simply not true that expertise for high quality production doesn't exist in the global south. For example, in response to a recent call made by the WHO for manufacturers interested in making the mRNA vaccines in developing countries, 50 companies stepped forward."

If vaccine equity is not only morally the right thing for the global community to ensure, but also how we might most effectively end this pandemic, Dr Clare Kelly, professor of psychology, TCD referred to the question often being asked now, *"As we are steadily working our way towards vaccinating younger people with no underlying health issues, how do we weigh up the question of when we should share our vaccine supply with other parts of the world?"*

Speaker, Dr. Shubhangi Karmakar an academic intern at TCD, responded to this, *"I think this 'zero-sum' question [itself] is flawed.."; [i.e. this doesn't have to be a situation where something gained by some, has to be lost by others]. "... I think a lot of these barriers are political and they are entrepreneurial. ...The future of a healthy world isn't philanthropy that donates 1% of its profits to a cause and then pats itself on the back..."*

"Indian doctors are dying, people who work in manufacturing in India are dying, Indian journalists are dying, Indian scientists are dying. It's not that India is dying because it's incapable. India and other countries, not reported on by English speaking media, are dying because they're not being given the tools to survive and I think that's the crux of the matter. We have to work on a mutual aid basis ..., not just to keep tiding people over until the next let down."

"The horrific situation in India is a warning to all of us that if we don't move urgently to share the vaccine technology and scale up manufacturing so everyone, everywhere, can have access to these lifesaving vaccines, we will never get the upper hand on Covid anywhere. The issue now is not charity, but mutual aid in the face of an overwhelming global public health catastrophe."

Public Health Professor Ivan Perry, said, *"For us, in Ireland, ...the fact that we are opposing the TRIPS waiver is shocking. The fact that we are not using our moral authority, our position and our seat on the UN Security Council to really drive forward this agenda... We are at a moment of truth, a moment of action."*

President Higgins, speaking last year at the United Nations General Assembly said, *"Solidarity among nations is key if we are to optimise the world's management and eventual exit from this pandemic. Our citizens must be able and encouraged to see themselves in the space of the*

vulnerability of each other. Solidarity requires, too, our understanding of the different kinds of vulnerability, as well as differences in capacities and circumstances."

In trying to make sense of what seems to be a government refusal of an obvious global solution to a global pandemic, Dr. Shubhangi Karmakar said, "*We possibly don't have time to decipher the excuses, to find out why exactly the help isn't being given. Right now we need to impart on (the Irish Government) that if we are blocking the TRIPS waiver, ..., we are the weakest link and we will be actively undermining our safety and our threat to global safety thereafter.*"

Jim Clarcken highlighted the fact that if we do not urgently address the global vaccine supply issue, nine out of ten people in poor countries could miss out on a Covid-19 vaccine. That not only will the scale of suffering and death in this scenario be unimaginable, it is likely to reverse decades of great progress on global poverty, underdevelopment and inequality. He called on the Irish government to end its opposition to the TRIPS waiver and to work to deliver urgently needed vaccines to the world, "*We must ensure that intellectual property rights are not protected above human life.*"

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BACKGROUND DETAILS:

ISAG (Independent Scientific Advocacy Group) is offering the group's expertise and experience to work together with Governments and the people to aim for Zero Covid, meaning zero mystery cases in our shared islands. Founded by Anthony Staines, Gerry Killeen, and Tomás Ryan in June 2020, I.S.A.G. is independent of the government. All of our members are volunteers and they freely commit their time every week to discuss the COVID-19 science that underpins our governments' response strategies. ISAG is a multidisciplinary group of scientists, academics, and researchers who have come together to advocate for a SARS-CoV-2 elimination strategy. I.S.A.G. has published several papers outlining its strategy and recommendations, and you can find them at www.isagcovid19.org

FURTHER INFORMATION:

Tánaiste Leo Varadkar's comments referred to by Jim Clarcken above were made on 6 May 2021: '*very few countries in the global south have the infrastructural know-how or the materials to make those vaccines and there's no point in giving somebody a recipe if they don't have the kitchen or the cooking skills or the ingredients.*'

Reported here: <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/health/government-and-biq-pharma-face-clash-on-covid-19-vaccine-patent-waiver-1.4557184>