

COVID-19 vaccine equity only way to beat the virus



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WHILE CANADA HAS made great strides in fighting COVID-19 over the past two years, and indeed many countries have also made remarkable progress in getting their people vaccinated and relatively safe from the virus, there are still countries that have been woefully underserved when it comes to getting the COVID-19 vaccines into the arms of their citizens. This is a huge problem, not only for the countries in question who are suffering even more than they would need to if vaccines had been more readily available to them, but also for countries like Canada and other nations who have had the good fortune to fully vaccinate the majority of their populations by now. By not making the vaccines available to everyone on Earth who wants them, we are creating the perfect storm for variants of the COVID-19 virus to manifest themselves and spread from their origin point to other parts of the world. Now obviously there are exceptions to the rule when it comes to COVID-19 vaccines, as some people cannot take them for medical reasons or for religious reasons. I totally respect that. But for those who want to get the vaccines in some parts of the world, it is simply not an option, as they are either not available at all or not available to vaccinate everyone who is eligible to get the shot. According to the World Health Organization, while the vaccines were developed relatively quickly by the various pharmaceutical companies like Pfizer and Merck, their global distribution has lagged behind the speed at which the virus is spreading globally. The vast majority have been distributed in high and upper middle-income countries like Canada and the U.S., and they say that if they'd been rolled out equally, there would have been enough to cover all health care workers and older people across the globe. In a statement issued March 1, the Multilateral Leaders Task Force, a joint initiative of the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank Group, the WHO, and the World Trade Organization which aims to support the roll out of COVID-19 tools by leveraging multilateral finance and trade solutions (especially for low- and middle- income countries), said that unequal

access to vaccines was rampant, prolonging the pandemic. According to them, 23 countries have yet to fully vaccinate 10 per cent of their populations, 73 countries have yet to achieve a 40 per cent vaccination rate, and many more are projected to miss the 70 per cent target by mid-2022. The biggest challenges are in low-income countries, mostly in Africa, where only seven per cent of people have been fully vaccinated compared to 73 per cent in high-income countries, they said in their statement. On their website, the WHO says that the global failure to share vaccines equitably is taking its toll on some of the world's poorest and most vulnerable people. New variants of concern mean that the risks of infection have increased in all countries who are not yet protected by vaccination. According to a PLOS Global Public Health article by T.A. Ghebreyesus (who is also the WHO's director general) published last October, the 30 poorest countries in the world have fully vaccinated just two per cent of their populations, which is not even enough to vaccinate health workers or those at greatest risk of the virus. With 6.5 billion doses given around the world by September of 2021, and global vaccine production at almost 1.5 billion doses per month, supply is not the issue, but allocation to the countries and organizations like COVAX and the African Vaccine Acquisition Trust, that need vaccines the most. Ghebreyesus' article suggests several ways to spur the equitable sharing of vaccines to those who need them most around the world including; countries with high volumes of vaccine swapping near term delivery schedules with COVAX and AVAT, vaccine manufacturers immediately prioritizing and fulfilling their contracts to COVAX and AVAT and provide clear supply forecasts, the G7 and all dose sharing countries should fulfill their pledges to share vaccines right away, all countries should eliminate export restrictions and any other trade barriers on the vaccines and the inputs involved in their production, and everyone coming together including leadership and economic capital to make vaccine equity a reality as soon as possible. While I knew generally that there was an inequality going on with vaccines around the world, I was shocked by how much. Hopefully with much effort on the part of governments, health care organizations like the WHO and private citizens like you and me, this unfortunate state of affairs can be changed for the better. For more information on vaccine inequity and how to help to promote and enable vaccine equity worldwide, go to www.who.int/campaigns/vaccine-equity.