

Sustainable Health Equity Movement

Call on Covid-19 related patent waiver and know-how sharing.

One year after our request (SHEM founding letter) of lifting Covid-related patents, the government of the United States announced last 6th May its position to do so for Covid vaccines and for the duration of the pandemic partially supporting the proposal to the World Trade Organization that India and South Africa made last October joined thereafter by over 160 countries.

The announcement, complying with Biden's commitment during his electoral campaign, also mentions the USA intention to support the access to know-how and supplies needed to produce those vaccines. This is an unprecedented shift in the USA long standing position protecting patents. Even in the times of the AIDS pandemic high-income countries protected patents above global access needs. A voluntary patent pool mechanism created 20 years after the beginning of that pandemic triggered generic production, price reduction and access to life saving medicines. The delay then probably meant 20 million preventable deaths while it soared \$20Bn profits of big Pharma corporations.

Will the move of the USA avoid such unfair and tragic death toll again now with the Covid pandemic?

Access to Covid vaccines has been so far grossly skewed by market dynamics. The effectivity shown in countries with high vaccination coverage, together with the highly unequal international vaccine distribution (we have estimated GINI 0.57, even higher than international income inequality) means that vaccine inequity could mean over 600,000 preventable deaths during 2021. (SHEM paper to G20)

Besides the USA announcement, what is needed to prevent, again, that tragic loss of life?

The patent waiver needs a unanimous decision by all WTO members. Among the other countries hosting the patent holders of so far WHO approved vaccines against Covid, the European Union, the United Kingdom and China have cautiously stated they are ready to discuss the proposal. Russia, with its Sputnik vaccine pending WHO approval yet supplied to many countries globally, has declared its support to waving Covid vaccine patents.

The WTO General Council will be discussing the patent waiver proposal again this week.

It comes at a time when India, with half the world's reported cases (around one million a day now) and one third of all Covid deaths (now at 15,000 daily) has redirected its production to meet its national urgent needs. Meanwhile China, the leading global producer, with its Sinopharm vaccine approved the day after Biden's announcement, emerges as the largest capacity for global supply.



Whatever the complex geopolitical and market strategies of countries behind their Covid patent waiver positions, the WTO consensus would enable the expansion of the global production capacity, and increase global vaccine access and equity.

Therefore, our Sustainable Health Equity Movement, which has gathered during its first year over 200 organizations and indirectly 2 million health equity advocates, welcomes the USA announcement and continues to advocate all countries to approve the proposal of India and South Africa from last October to lift patents for all Covid-related products.

While lifting patent protection is an enabling factor, it needs to be accompanied by the sharing of know-how in Covid vaccine production. We therefore also reiterate our call for all countries to also join the Covid technology access pool launched by the World Health Organization and Costa Rica one year ago aimed at sharing intellectual property and know-how so as to boost equitable access to Covid-19 vaccines. No country nor any manufacturer has joined this pool so far.

The world has changed since the AIDS pandemic started 40 years ago. It then took 15 years to develop effective treatments and 30 years to discover the HIV genome while no effective vaccine has been developed yet. Patents then delayed access and translated in tragic suffering for over a decade. Today knowledge can be developed and shared much faster. The Covid-19 genome was sequenced 12 days after the diagnosis of the first case and was shared globally. Today vaccines' components come from over 100 countries and knowledge roots from millions of scientists working globally, many supported by public funding and the vast majority wishing their efforts save lives ahead of soaring profits far above the private investments made.

The SHEM calls on all countries to waive Covid-related patents and scientists, professionals and companies producing Covid-related products, to share their know-how and so contribute to roll back the Covid pandemic and its growing tragic death toll.

We also call on the UN Secretary General to call for a global framework on global public goods which translate global knowledge into sustainable health and well-being equity beyond the present pandemic.