

Correspondence

Ensuring COVID-19 vaccines for low-income countries

ABSTRACT

Ensuring global access for coronavirus disease-2019 (COVID-19) vaccines is key to avoiding severe COVID-19 disease and achieving herd immunity. This correspondence highlights the importance of advocating for effective and safe COVID-19 vaccines for low-income countries while ensuring equitable access to COVID-19 vaccines. Global access to COVID-19 vaccines for the common good is much needed.

Keywords common good, COVID-19, low-income countries, vaccine hesitancy

Vaccination has had a tremendous impact on the health and global population.¹ Ensuring global access for COVID-19 vaccines is key to avoiding severe COVID-19 disease and achieving herd immunity. In a recent correspondence, the authors proposed a massive campaign drive through media to educate the public regarding the efficacy of anti-COVID 19 vaccines both for self-preservation and promotion of the common good.² Although, it is feasible to deliver massive COVID-19 vaccination campaigns through the media, there are still challenges to overcome COVID-19 in terms of delivery and uptake in lower-income countries (LICs): from regulation and approval to prioritization of high-risk groups (HRGs) and vaccine delivery as well as vaccine hesitancy and misinformation.

While rich countries like the United States and United Kingdom are starting to vaccinate their populations against COVID-19, LICs like the Philippines are still lacking access to a vaccine. Most LICs face difficulties in accessing and delivering vaccines for COVID-19 to their populations³ due to several reasons. First, the perceived safety of vaccination is fundamentally linked to vaccine confidence. In 2019, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared ‘vaccine hesitancy’ as one of the top 10 global health threats.⁴ In 2017, the Philippines ranked low in terms of vaccine confidence due to a newly introduced vaccine for dengue (Dengvaxia), which was given to nearly 850 000 children before it was recognized that the vaccine posed a risk to previously unexposed people.⁵ As COVID-19 cases rise in the Philippines, low public trust in vaccines is considered as one of the huge blocks in the

government’s vaccination program.⁶ Second, governments need to ensure an equitable access to COVID-19 vaccines. The equitable access to an effective and efficacious vaccine is critical for mitigating and maintaining public health systems and ensuring economic growth. That is why the demand for COVID-19 vaccines has been so high, although supply has been limited. High-income countries represent only 16% of the world’s population, but they have purchased more than half of all COVID-19 vaccine doses.⁷ Rich nations should not engage in ‘vaccine nationalism’ since poorer nations are also in need of vaccines. Thus, rich countries are encouraged to distribute their excess vaccine supply to poorer countries. Game theory suggests that donating doses of COVID-19 vaccines can help nations of all income levels.⁷ Moreover, the medical and moral imperatives for equitable access to COVID-19 vaccines are the reason why several organizations like the COVID-19 Vaccine Global Access (COVAX) facility, co-led by the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunization, the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations (CEPI), and the World Health Organization (WHO) are created. COVAX is working for quick, fair, safe and global equitable access to COVID-19 vaccines and thus, it is one of the best options for LICs to combat the pandemic.⁸ WHO is tasked with ensuring fair allocation and prioritization of countries eligible to receive vaccines from the COVAX Facility.

The COVID-19 pandemic is a global catastrophe that led to massive loss of lives and livelihoods. Despite these challenges, vaccination will remain central to COVID-19 prevention. The unprecedented situation in global public health crisis is still

evolving. The COVID-19 pandemic is unlikely to end until there is a global roll-out of vaccines that protect against severe disease and preferably drive herd immunity. The surest path out of this pandemic is toward equity. Global access to COVID-19 vaccines for the common good is much needed.

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Conflict of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest in this paper.

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