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Wealthy nations must prevent 'vaccine apartheid'

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THE world faces two possible futures: one in which all nations band together to bring COVID-19 under control, and another in which the wealthiest countries emerge from the pandemic but developing nations do not. In this second scenario, two classes emerge ? a vaccinated class and an unvaccinated class.

The choices wealthy countries make now will determine which future takes hold.

The seeds of a two-class tomorrow are already being sown. Ten high-income countries have secured and administered 75 per cent of the current global coronavirus vaccine supply. The United States will have purchased enough doses to inoculate its entire population by the fall. Britain has already injected one-third of adults there with at least a first dose.

It's understandable that wealthy countries are racing to have enough of their populations inoculated to reach herd immunity this year. These goals are crucial if we are to see our way through to the other side of the pandemic.

But such efforts will fail if they do not include the rest of the world. In most poor and developing countries, the vaccine is unavailable. Not even front-line health-care workers have received a single dose.

The pandemic has hit rich countries hard, even with their sophisticated medical care and robust economies. But for countries with fragile health-care systems and economies, the impact of COVID-19 on lives and livelihoods has been crushing.

High-income countries should use their wealth and influence to ensure that all countries get access to some vaccines this year and that vaccines are available and affordable for everyone, everywhere in the not-too-distant future.

If wealthy countries instead choose vaccine nationalism, inoculating only their own people, the future looks bleak. In the nations that are vaccinated, people will reopen businesses, gather in restaurants, take vacations and fly internationally. They will get booster shots as needed. But this sense of security will be false.

Even as their destinies diverge, these two worlds will still be connected. COVID-19, the disease that can be caused by the coronavirus, will continue to blaze a deadly trail through the poorest countries and circulate back throughout the world.

If we leave swaths of the world unvaccinated, we'll see more widespread transmission of the coronavirus, which means more variants will inevitably arise, some more virulent and possibly even deadlier than the ones we already know.

This threatens the effectiveness of current vaccines and diagnostics, prolonging the pandemic.

It would be a profound moral failure to protect only some of the global population while leaving everyone else to the virus's ravages, including the economic fallout. A term has already been coined for this: "vaccine apartheid," whereby countries in the Global South remain months, if not years, behind the countries in the West. But morality is not the only reason to inoculate the whole world. Viruses don't stay put in one country or region, and national economies do not recover when much of the world is hindered.

As new variants gain ground, governments will revert to lockdowns to control the spread. The consequences for travel and trade could cost the global economy trillions. A recent study by the International Chamber of Commerce predicted that leaving poor countries unvaccinated could deprive rich countries of US\$4.5 trillion in economic activity. At the same time, vaccine distribution in fragile countries would help avert humanitarian catastrophe linked to deepening poverty and hunger.

There are steps that can be taken to prevent vaccine inequality from becoming entrenched. It will require significant political and financial commitments from governments as well as flexibility from companies, but these are investments that will save lives and fuel global recovery.

For instance, wealthy nations could offer robust support for the COVAX Facility, the mechanism created to meet global vaccine needs by the World Health Organization, the Gavi vaccine alliance and the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations, with the participation of 190 countries. COVAX is on track to secure and deliver two billion doses to cover at least 20 per cent of the populations in need, starting with health-care workers and the most vulnerable, but it is still several billion dollars short.

That required funding is just a tiny fraction of the trillions that developed nations have spent on coronavirus relief packages. With an additional, relatively small investment, the world could reap hundreds of billions of dollars in economic benefits and protect the health of everyone on Earth for the long term. Vastly more people could be vaccinated if excess doses were also shared with COVAX, and global manufacturing capacity would be doubled.

When it comes to infectious disease, no one is truly safe until everyone is. Today, rich nations can still decide which future they want.

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