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RESHAPING GLOBAL HEALTH AFTER COVID-19

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EVENT REPORT

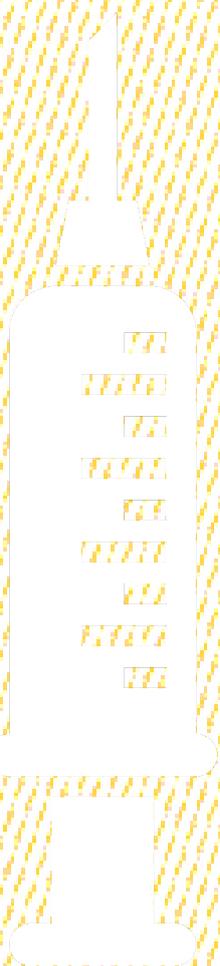
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The COVID-19 pandemic has cast a new light on the necessity of addressing health inequalities across the globe.

As the European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen has remarked on several occasions, the pandemic will not end until everyone is protected globally.

However, measures such as putting in place export restrictions and refusing to suspend intellectual property (IP) rights on vaccines and treatment have been criticised for limiting vaccine access in poorer countries.

In this report, EURACTIV explores how the COVID emergency may provide an impetus for boosting global preparedness for future public health crises through international cooperation.



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Waiving vaccine patents saves lives, health campaigners tell the EU

By Gerardo Fortuna | EURACTIV.com



The protest in front of the Berlaymont building was part of the global campaign Vaccinate our world (VOW) which calls on governments and decision-makers not to politicise COVID-19 vaccine race. [LOVE SMITH/AHF]

A series of protests have been staged in front of the European Commission and at a vaccine manufacturing plant in Belgium, calling for temporarily lifting of the intellectual property (IP) rights of COVID-19 vaccines and treatments.

Whoever happened to be strolling along the EU district in Brussels on Wednesday (2 June) could hardly miss a big banner rolled out in front of the Berlaymont, the headquarters of the EU executive, reading 'Patents kill'.

Some campaigners who pitched camp there held smaller placards saying 'Access to Vaccine. Right, not a privilege' and 'No profits from the

pandemics'.

The protest was part of the global campaign [Vaccinate our world \(VOW\)](#), which calls on governments and decision-makers not to politicise COVID-19 vaccines and instead make efforts to fully immunise citizens across the world.

The campaign is now focusing on suspending patents for COVID-19 vaccines, in a bid to speed up vaccine access in poorer countries.

The issue of waiving IP rights for COVID-19 treatments and vaccines was first tabled by India and South Africa in [a proposal](#) to the World

Trade Organization (WTO), which was backed by around 100 other countries.

The waiver would cover obligations in four sections of the [Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights \(TRIPS\)](#) that involves copyright and related rights, industrial designs, patents and the protection of undisclosed information.

However, the relevant EU decision-makers, including the bloc's Health Commissioner Stella Kyriakides, have so far been quite sceptical about the benefits of the IP rights waiver.

According to the pharmaceutical industry, the waiver would have little

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positive impact without a transfer of know-how and technology, which remains difficult at this stage.

“We understand that patents are important for innovation,” a protester told EURACTIV after the demonstration. “However, when health is at stake, they need to be temporarily waived because we are talking about saving people’s lives,” she added.

A similar protest was organised on Thursday (3 June) outside Pfizer’s manufacturing plant in Puurs, Belgium.

Campaigners told EURACTIV that the action is not aimed against Pfizer or any single company but points the finger at the whole pharmaceutical sector that is opposing the waiver of patents.

BIDEN’S GAME-CHANGER

In an expected shift, US president Joe Biden openly supported a patent waiver last month, putting pressure on more reluctant global health players such as the EU and Switzerland.

Although Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said Brussels was ready to discuss the proposal after Washington’s backing, the bloc is currently preparing a proposal to the WTO for increasing vaccine production that considers alternatives to waiving patents

“As a European, I’m ashamed that the significant support on this did not come from the EU first,” socialist MEP Juozas Olekas told a [recent event](#) organised by the VOW campaign.

The Lithuanian lawmaker has recently signed an open letter to the

European Commission supporting a temporary waiver of the IP rights and knowledge-sharing in the process.

For the VOW campaigners, the IP waiver could be the first milestone of a longer path that could help to rethink health globally and build new infrastructure across the world.

“We need to decolonise global health, and this means we need to share some knowledge and think broadly,” another campaigner told EURACTIV outside the Commission building.

The EU is engaged in some actions aimed at increasing awareness and the Commission published a report on Thursday on how the major digital social platforms are tackling disinformation on coronavirus.

For instance, Facebook launched vaccine profile picture frames, while Twitter held conversations on vaccines that received five million impressions.

LIVES OVER PROFITS

At least nine people have become new billionaires since the beginning of the COVID pandemic, according to a recent report drafted by the People’s Vaccine Alliance, which includes NGOs Oxfam and the United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS).

The authors of the study have processed data from the Forbes Rich List, concluding that this massive wealth concentration has been generated by vaccines, for a handful of people.

“We cannot ignore that injustice sometimes hurts more than a virus,” said the Lithuanian MEP Olekas, who

is a doctor and a former Lithuanian health minister.

According to the socialist lawmaker, those at the bottom of the social global ladder have faced more significant difficulties in fighting for their lives than those at the top.

Big pharma companies, he added, have used this pandemic to accumulate enormous extra profits and are now trying to make people believe that the waiver of IP rights would not solve the problem.

“We can overcome this pandemic only by walking together and putting the interests of their private capital in the second place,” he concluded.

INTERVIEW

We need to prepare the world for the next health crisis now – MEP

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By Giedre Peseckyte | EURACTIV.com



Kathleen Van Brempt is a Belgian socialist MEP who's Parliament's rapporteur on the trade-related aspects and implications of COVID-19. [EP/VIDAL]

The world needs to rethink intellectual property rights to get ready for the next pandemic and Europe has to do its part as a constructive partner at the negotiating table, Belgian socialist MEP Kathleen Van Brempt told EURACTIV in an interview.

Kathleen Van Brempt is the European Parliament's rapporteur on the trade-related aspects and implications of COVID-19. She spoke to EURACTIV's health reporter Giedre Peseckyte.

You are the rapporteur on a [file dealing with trade-related aspects and implications of COVID-19](#). Why is that relevant now?

With the Commission's new mandate, the narrative of the Green Deal and geopolitical challenges ahead, it was crystal clear that Europe needed another take on trade: how to reorganise multilateralism, how to position the EU in the world in a stronger way than in the past.

But also, public opinion has entered the debate on trade and COVID-19 made this even more urgent. And since the Commission is coming up with a review of its trade policy, we combined our reactions on this aspect too.

How could this new stance of the Parliament change the EU's trade?

We want to change drastically the narrative on sustainability. But there's also a need to be much more attentive

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to global trade when it comes to health. The world wasn't ready for this pandemic and that resulted in something that was unacceptable, namely, that today vaccines are accessible and affordable for rich countries, but not for the lower-middle-income countries. We need to prepare the world much better for the next health crisis.

How?

First of all, we need to keep the world open and not closed, which was what happened. There was a necessity to keep people from travelling, which is understandable, but that does not mean you have to reintroduce borders.

Also, we need much more knowledge on where medicines, protective material, and vaccines are produced. What is their production capacity? The crisis with vaccine manufacturing companies we had at the beginning of this year means that we need to know much more about value chains and how they work.

The report also touches on the importance of transparency on the supply and production, but how to achieve that?

It's extremely important that you force these companies to be more open and transparent when dealing with the public good. And in that sense, you cannot just ask, you have to force more transparency on these issues.

And then having a transparency mechanism for everything that comes in and out of the European internal market is also a good instrument but, there is a need for an institution within the Commission that really monitors all these issues.

The report also calls for a revision of the World Trade Organisation's Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS). What is the goal?

There's a paragraph on it in the report, but it's not very strong because there was no majority in the Parliament's trade committee and we'll see whether there is more support in the plenary.

I'm not against intellectual property rights but I think in a pandemic, you need to do whatever it takes to solve the problem. And if waiving the patents, at least temporarily, makes sure that you can ramp up production, then you should do that. I think there is a huge agreement that we start looking into these intellectual property rights to prepare the world for the next pandemics.

For sure, waiving the intellectual property rights of the vaccines alone is not the solution unless it goes hand in hand with technology transfer, with the education and training of people. Why wouldn't we try everything that can work to make sure that we have all the vaccines by the end of the year for everybody?

The Parliament has just voted [in favour of waiving patents](#).

This is a very strong message towards the Commission. The time to stop blocking further talks on the temporary waiver of patents for COVID-19 vaccines and related medical products is over. The TRIPS council decided to start text-based negotiations on the proposal for temporary patent waiver and Europe can choose where it prefers to sit: at the table as a constructive partner or just on the sidelines without any impact.

What is heard from manufacturers is that there are no capacities to do know-how and technology transfers. What is your opinion on this?

What you need to do then is to force. Europe can force its companies to do technology transfer. We could write in the next purchase agreements with these companies that they need to share that technology with African countries, for instance. So it's a broad discussion. It is not so easy just to say, okay, we waive and *voilà*, my conscience is clear, let's move on. That doesn't work.

Is compulsory licencing not enough? The Commission seems to be advocating for it.

The flexibilities within the TRIPS agreement do not work. The compulsory license implies a heavy administrative burden that is not really workable. So in any case for the future, we will have to look into the TRIPS agreement and how to make it much more reliable in pandemics.

Last week, the Commission presented its alternative to waiving IP rights. What's your take on that?

Trade Commissioner Valdis Dombrovskis is trying to do something, but I don't think it's good enough. What you need to do is change the TRIPS agreement and that will lead to a broader discussion. You really need to rethink intellectual properties within a pandemic situation. So my suggestion would be to sit down and negotiate on the waiver, and then come up with an initiative for the future.

PROMOTED CONTENT

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G7 & EU Must Put Lives before Profits and 'Vaccinate Our World' Now!

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AIDS Healthcare Foundation



Vaccinate our world campaign.

After more than a year blanketed by the pandemic—communities, economies, and health systems in the European Union and beyond continue to be devastated. It is all too clear that the world is in desperate need of an immediate and novel call-to-action to have a real chance at overcoming COVID-19.

In our continued advocacy for

global vaccine equity, AIDS Healthcare Foundation ([AHF](#)) calls on the governments of the Group of Seven (G7) and European Union (EU) to do everything necessary to '[Vaccinate Our World](#)' by supporting the current proposal at the World Trade Organization to [waive intellectual property \(IP\) protections](#) on all COVID-19 vaccines and technologies.

If there are any countries with

COVID-19 and no access to vaccines, then all countries are in danger. Of the nearly 2 billion vaccine doses administered worldwide as of June 1, 85% were given in wealthy nations. [Low-income countries](#) received a mere 0.3%, which puts the entire global community at risk of contracting emerging mutant variants of COVID-19.

With every COVID-19 death now

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preventable, it is simply unacceptable that many developing countries will not have access to lifesaving vaccines [until 2023](#). The world can boost vaccine production, but generic manufacturers need the requisite knowledge to ramp up production. Key nations, including the US, China, and Russia, have recently voiced [support for an IP waiver](#); however, other wealthy nations – namely remaining holdout countries from the [G7 and EU](#) – must follow suit if the world is to produce sufficient vaccine quantities to ‘Vaccinate Our World.’

While the pharmaceutical industry has proven that it can respond with rapid innovation to meet the emergency demand for COVID-19 vaccines, it is disgraceful that vaccine manufacturers have decided to profit from vaccine sales, particularly when taxpayer-funded investment and research drove development. For that investment alone, the world should have access to the technology and information it needs to expand vaccine production globally, wherever the infrastructure can accommodate or be established for it. Countries from the G7 and EU have the power to help ensure that happens.

South Africa and India were the first countries to [propose an IP waiver](#) on COVID-19 vaccines, which has since gained the support of more than 100 countries. If adopted, the patent waiver could help countries worldwide overcome the legal barriers preventing them from producing COVID-19 vaccines and treatments and put the world on the best course to defeat the pandemic.

AHF, the world’s largest HIV/AIDS care and treatment provider to more

than 1.5 million clients in 45 countries, has been on the frontlines of the battle against HIV/AIDS for more than 30 years. We fought through the early days of *that* pandemic when there was no treatment for HIV, and since the creation of antiretroviral therapy, we’ve advocated for free and universal access to treatment.

People living with HIV were forced to clear numerous hurdles for more than a decade before they could access affordable, life-saving medications. The world cannot make that same mistake with COVID-19 vaccines, but it is sadly headed down that path if government leaders do not do everything necessary to ‘Vaccinate Our World.’

G7 and European Union countries must mandate that vaccine manufacturers do the right thing and prevent countless avoidable deaths by granting access to their intellectual property. The world cannot afford any further delays in getting vaccines to where they are needed most.

In addition to waiving vaccine patents, the ‘VOW’ campaign urges other significant actions to ensure we can ‘Vaccinate Our World,’ including securing \$100 billion from wealthy nations and economic institutions like the International Monetary Fund and World Bank. That funding, a small price to pay to vaccinate all the world’s citizens, will help ensure the production of 7 billion vaccines within one year. The world must also promote international cooperation, not politics, as the driving force for ending the pandemic, which must start by demanding that countries be 100% transparent and accountable.

The ‘Vaccinate Our World’ call-to-action kicked off in April with a global digital advocacy campaign and has continued with virtual media events in Europe, Asia, South America, and Africa. AHF’s Europe Bureau has also recently organized multiple public demonstrations in Belgium in front of the European Commission, European Council, and the offices of COVID-19 vaccine manufacturer Pfizer.

Visit VaccinateOurWorld.org to learn more and take the pledge to demand global vaccine equity by urging G7 and EU leaders to support the COVID-19 vaccine patents waiver.



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