

Canada, global vaccine inequality & TRIPS waiver

The Numbers

- High-income countries are vaccinating [25x faster](#) than low income countries.
- As of April 20th, [0.3% of the 800 million](#) COVID-19 vaccine doses given had gone to people in low income countries.
- Some estimates predict at least [90% of the population in 67 low-income countries](#) won't be vaccinated by the end of 2021.
- It could take [almost 5 years](#) before we reach global herd immunity.

What is a vaccine monopoly?

The vaccine technology and knowledge were paid for, in large part, by over \$100 billion of taxpayers' money. Now it is being treated as their private property by corporations so they rake in enormous profits.

Pharmaceutical corporations are using patents and other barriers to block competition, restricting widespread production and keeping prices high. As a result, vaccines are being bought up by those wealthy countries, while billions of people in lower income countries are left behind.

There are qualified manufacturers in Africa, Latin America, and Asia that have the capacity to make more vaccines, but the patent holders' refusal to share vaccine know-how and technology is preventing them from starting production.

What is the WTO TRIPS Waiver?

In October 2020, South Africa and India made a [joint proposal](#) to temporarily waive certain World Trade Organization intellectual property rights. The waiver would allow countries around the world to direct the local production or import of vaccines and other pandemic-related technologies without fear of incurring a WTO dispute for violation of TRIPS rules pertaining to copyright, patents, and trade secrets. Over two-thirds of WTO member countries support this waiver proposal.

Why is Canada standing in the way?

Since the waiver was proposed, wealthy countries have backed pharmaceutical corporations and their profits over a rapid and affordable rollout of COVID-related vaccines and treatments. Canada, Australia, Brazil, the EU, Japan, Norway, Switzerland, and the U.K. have not signed on to the waiver—and they are only tepidly now endorsing text-based negotiations at the WTO TRIPS Council, as endorsed by the U.S. in early May

Canada, for example, has stated it “will take part in WTO discussions,” but the government has not expressed support. Canada has claimed, wrongly, that existing flexibilities in the TRIPS agreement already give countries all the tools they need. The reality is these so-called TRIPS flexibilities are not designed for a global pandemic – they are only accessible on a case-by-case basis and can take years to settle.

The waiver is a start

The TRIPS waiver is not a silver bullet. There are other issues like supply of raw materials. But the waiver is an important step in removing barriers that impede more widespread production. Temporarily waiving relevant intellectual property, that right now simply reinforces monopolies, is an important move and Canada cannot stand in the way.