

Jabbing Around the World: Global Disparities Accessing SARS-CoV-2 Vaccines

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We asked UIA health law experts: How are your country's vaccine efforts faring? The following is a broad overview of responses as of early May 2021. A complete copy of all contributors' responses is available, and their contact information is at the end of this article.

À l'échelle mondiale, plus de trois millions de personnes sont décédées du SRAS-CoV-2 (Covid) début mai 2021¹. Alors que certains pays occidentaux reviennent à une vie plus normale, la situation mondiale est désastreuse. Dans le monde, il y a eu presque autant de cas au cours de la première semaine de mai 2021 qu'au cours des cinq premiers mois de la pandémie. En tant qu'êtres humains, nous devrions tous combattre ce virus ensemble, mais le déploiement mondial de la vaccination contre le SRAS-CoV-2 démontre de fortes inégalités. La distribution des vaccins - un point positif dans l'épidémie - est faussée de manière grotesque. Les appels se multiplient pour que les vaccins soient rapidement produits et distribués dans le monde. Quelques pays font don d'oxygène, de ventilateurs et d'autres fournitures médicales à des pays en crise comme l'Inde, mais il n'existe aucune réponse mondiale coordonnée adéquate.

A nivel mundial, más de tres millones de personas han muerto a causa del SARS-CoV-2 (Covid) a principios de mayo de 2021². Si bien algunos países occidentales están regresando a una vida más normal, el panorama mundial es terrible. En todo el mundo, hubo casi tantos casos en la primera semana de mayo de 2021 como en los primeros cinco meses de la pandemia. Como seres humanos, todos deberíamos luchar juntos contra este virus, sin embargo, el lanzamiento mundial de la vacunación contra el SARS-CoV-2 demuestra grandes desigualdades. La distribución de vacunas, un punto brillante de la epidemia, está sesgada de manera grotesca. Los ruegos son cada vez más fuertes para que las vacunas se produzcan y distribuyan rápidamente a nivel mundial. Algunos países están donando oxígeno, ventiladores y otros suministros médicos a naciones en crisis como India, pero aún no existe una respuesta global coordinada adecuada.

Who is Getting Vaccinated?

Israel outpaced the rest of the world, vaccinating 55% of its population and cautiously reopening using a vaccine passport system. While over one-third of Americans are fully vaccinated, the United States hoped to have 70% of its adult population vaccinated by July 4.

Comparatively, only about 2.7% of India's population is fully vaccinated. Thousands are dying daily as the lack of vaccines is compounded by a shortage of basic supplies including oxygen and hospital beds.

While vaccine access in Brazil could be viewed as "compulsory" under the Constitution, supply is severely limited, with only about 6% of its population vaccinated. In a failed attempt to speed up the process, the government approved a plan to make prepayment more flexible and adopted a risk reduction liability policy.

About 18% of Romanians and Italians have been vaccinated, while 23% of the French have received at least one dose. As with many nations, vaccinations in these countries have been done in stages. First, only health care workers were vaccinated, then essential workers and high-risk individuals,

1. Johns Hopkins University Coronavirus Resource Center <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html>, May 10, 2021.

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and now the general public is eligible. The current plan aims to immunize *all* Italians over age 50 by the end of summer. Similar goals exist in many European countries, leaving open the thorny question whether the countries will open borders to vaccinated travelers.

Covid-19 Vaccines Global Access (Covax) – led by the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunization (GAVI) – aims to provide equitable access to vaccines worldwide. So far, it has distributed about 41 million doses. With Covax’s help (alongside other sources), Nigeria began vaccinating health care workers, police and ‘strategic’ leaders. With 4.4 million doses on hand as of April, 2021, about 58.3% of eligible Nigerians received their first dose. Through a combination of Covax and purchasing vaccines, Nigeria is expecting 28 million more by early June 2021, and optimistically hopes to vaccinate 40% of its 200+ million population before 2022.

In Saudi Arabia, about 35% of their population has been fully vaccinated, with success due in part to “Tawakkalna,” an AI software application used to trace and track the virus, make vaccine reservations, and provide permits and services for the fully vaccinated. In Turkey, about 10% of eligible citizens have received vaccinations. First, health care workers were eligible, then those over 65 received two doses of vaccines. The current plan aims to vaccinate all citizens over the age of 40 and university students so they can return to school next semester.

While vaccine rates vary widely, even countries with success stories have been unable to achieve herd immunity. Herd immunity means if a sufficient percentage of the population becomes immune, then *everyone* will have indirect protection from infectious disease. However, the virus is changing too quickly, new variants spreading too easily, and vaccinations proceeding too slowly for it to be within reach anytime soon.

What Obstacles Have Prevented more Widespread Vaccinations?

Two popular Covid vaccines are made from recombinant mRNA, produced by Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna. Unfortunately, many regions have had little access to them, partly because they require deep freezing, making them difficult to transport and maintain.

There have been quality control problems with the Johnson & Johnson (J&J) vaccine, and blood clotting problems with both the J&J and AstraZeneca vaccines which halted use of 70 million doses worldwide, causing many doses to expire past their due date.

For Japan, it is not just sparse supplies that has caused only 1% of the population over age 15 to be fully vaccinated thus far. Following the vaccination of one million frontline health care workers, a first come, first serve registration system was to be adopted for other eligible citizens using a popular Japanese app called ‘LINE.’ However, the week before it was to go live, it was revealed that the LINE app kept Japanese consumers’ data in a data center located in China without prior consent, resulting in Japan’s cancellation of the program. Alternative web-based reservation systems became overburdened and repeatedly crashed. Following inadvertent disclosures of personal data, several websites also temporarily closed, overpowering the already-deluged vaccine phone lines. Additionally, *only physicians* or nurses under their direct supervision are allowed to vaccinate, according to the Japanese Physician’s Act, causing a shortage of administrators. Compounding these problems, many municipalities cannot organize effective reservation schedules because they have little advance

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notice on vaccine delivery. Japan declared that it would attempt to finish vaccinating those eligible by the end of July 2021. *If the current vaccination rate continues, it is estimated that it will take seven years to vaccinate all Japanese.*

Australia managed the virus itself fairly well, as it is a sparsely populated island with no land borders. However, it has fared less well with the roll out of vaccines, with only 4% of its population fully vaccinated due to purchasing 90% of its medical supplies and vaccines from overseas. While outsourcing is cheaper, it comes at a cost in a pandemic, when medical supplies are scarce worldwide. Because Australia has almost no Covid cases, it is unlikely to be placed near the front of any international queue for vaccines.

Even countries with an abundant vaccine supply aren't reaching herd immunity. While Israel's data is impressive, herd immunity is still illusive and there are no robust vaccination plans for West Bank Palestinians. Other wealthy nations, including the United States, are also not likely to reach herd immunity because of the number of "anti-vaxxers" who refuse vaccines despite availability due to mistrust of governments, science, or both.

What is on the Horizon?

WHO recently granted emergency approval for the Covid vaccine made by Sinopharm, which has already been given to millions in China. WHO's approval has the potential to rapidly accelerate its access globally³.

Additional vaccines are set to conclude their clinical trials in the upcoming months. CureVac, a small German manufacturer, is on the cusp of obtaining approval for its mRNA vaccine. It does not require deep freeze, making it easier to distribute than the Pfizer and Moderna mRNA vaccines. In Brazil, Mexico, Thailand and Vietnam, researchers are starting trials for vaccines that can be mass-produced in chicken eggs.

India is embarking on the world's largest vaccination drive, making pricing, procurement, eligibility and administration of vaccines flexible, while incentivizing vaccine manufacturers to scale up their production. How? By permitting them to release 50% of their supply to State Governments and empowering Indian states to procure additional doses directly from manufacturers.

In Australia, a team of scientists at Monash University are developing three mRNA vaccine candidates and arguing strongly for *onshore production*, to give the country more flexibility in adapting to any new strains of Covid-19.

In the United States, gifts and money are being offered to get people vaccinated. Ample jabs are available for everyone age 12+. Pfizer expects to prove the safety of its vaccine for children age 2+ by September 2021, which would expand the vaccinated population, and is seeking

federal approval rather than emergency use authorization, which may reduce vaccine hesitancy.

What Should be done for Better Covid 19 Vaccination Programs in order to Guarantee Health Rights?

India and South Africa petitioned the World Trade Organization (WTO) to seek the waiver for all intellectual property rights to vaccines under international treaties. The U.S. endorses a temporary patent waiver to help more countries produce vaccines, but it could take months to negotiate and requires unanimous agreement among the 164 WTO countries⁴. Critics claim a waiver could reduce vaccines' quality control and sap resources needed to boost production in existing locations.

The pandemic has had a negative impact on the global observance of human rights. What is being increasingly recognized is the need to act and speak collectively. By making serious, realistic efforts to airlift vaccines, medications and other necessities to the people in greatest need gives the human race the greatest chance to defeat this virus. ■

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3. Sinopharm: Chinese Covid vaccine gets WHO emergency approval, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-56967973>, May 10, 2021.

4. EU supports Covid vaccine patent waiver talks, but critics say won't solve scarcity. <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/eu-willing-discuss-covid-19-vaccine-patent-waiver-eus-von-der-leyen-2021-05-06/> May 10, 2021.