

## Opinion – Vaccine Nationalism and the Global Precariat

Written by Promise Frank Ejiofor

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# Opinion – Vaccine Nationalism and the Global Precariat

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PROMISE FRANK EJIOFOR, FEB 6 2021

An African proverb says that ‘when two elephants fight, it is the grass that suffers.’ Beyond its literality, this means that the weak get hurt when the powerful fight. In the context of the coronavirus pandemic wherein contests over vaccines is the new normal, we see this proverb come alive. Whilst the European Union feels it is more entitled to millions of doses produced by the British-Swedish drug firm AstraZeneca to the extent that it threatened to put checks on the Northern Ireland border in order to prevent vaccines produced in the European Union from reaching the United Kingdom, the poorest countries in the Global South – especially in Africa – are on the peripheries. If anything, the extant vaccine nationalism magnifies the longstanding inequality between developed and developing countries. This has dire consequences for global prosperity.

Countries with the highest inoculations tend to count amongst the richest: Israel, the United Kingdom, the United Arab Emirates, the United States, to name but a few. Developed nations have purchased over 50 percent of the vaccines and even hoard more than needed for their populations. Indeed, the prediction is that by the end of 2021 all citizens of wealthy nations will have been inoculated so that normalcy could be returned without any restrictions whatsoever. But this is not the case for poor nations. South America accounts for 15 percent of coronavirus cases but less than 3 percent of global vaccine doses have been administered in the region. Africa lags in the vaccine drive as over 90 percent of its 1.3 billion population are yet to receive a single dose of the vaccine. Despite the 55-member African Union announcing that it has secured 670 million doses for its member states, this is below par as it is insufficient to inoculate the entire continent.

Thus whilst citizens in the Global North cannot wait to be rid of lockdown restrictions on their freedom, the precariat in the Global South will have to suffer further restrictions and deaths for the foreseeable future. Ultimately, it entails the pandemic will linger for at least three more years and become endemic to the wretched of the earth.

To mitigate this, the World Health Organisation in collaboration with the Vaccine Alliance and the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations launched COVAX, a global vaccine-sharing initiative, in April 2020. The aim of COVAX is equitable access to vaccines for every country especially middle-income and low-income countries. COVAX ensures that nations which subscribe to it place vaccine orders for their own populations as part of the Advance Market Commitment (AMC) but also help to ensure that vaccines are globally distributed. But as wealthier nations are part of the scheme, vaccine nationalism remains overt. This has led to controversy as some wealthy nations that have secured a reasonable amount of vaccine for their citizens have tapped into COVAX to purchase more. Canada, New Zealand, and Singapore, have all requested early allocation of the vaccine. And, in response to criticisms as to why it takes from COVAX, Canada’s international development minister, Karina Gould, retorted that ‘Canada made the decision, as other countries have, to take on this first allocation, because we recognise how important it is that all Canadians have access to vaccines.’ So much for a nation lauded as one of the most tolerant in the world.

There are moral and economic reasons why citizens and governments of wealthy nations must care about the global precariat – that is, citizens and states in the poorest regions of the Global South.

The moral contention derives from Peter Singer’s ‘drowning child’ thought experiment. Suppose you were heading to your first class in the morning and discovered a child was drowning. All it would take away from you to rescue the

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child is to get your clothes muddy and wet so that by the time you go home and change you will have missed your lectures. Obviously, almost every reasonable person would choose to have their clothes soaked to save a drowning child. In other words, they recognise an obligation to rescue the child. But, Singer asks further questions: does it matter if others see this drowning child and ignore? And does it make any difference if this drowning child is in our country or another country? Singer's answer is that it does not matter if others ignore the drowning child, since if we recognise within us that there is such a moral obligation we would not care if others do not feel obligated to rescue the child. Moreover, once we recognise that there is an obligation to save the drowning child we would not care if the child is a stranger or a compatriot. Morality entails care for our kith and kin but also for the stranger.

The global precariat are the drowning children in the age of coronavirus pandemic and vaccine proliferation. Rather than spend billions of pounds on hoarding vaccines to show how powerful they are in the international community, wealthier nations could do better by committing funds to alleviate the plight of the poorest nations who have borne much of the brunt of the pandemic. Vaccine nationalism threatens the very fabric of our moral imagination because it closes wealthier nations off from the rest of the human population; it takes us too far away from our humanity by couching solidarity as weakness and indifference as strength. And the fact that wealthier nations can purchase more than required to ensure their own citizens are inoculated by the end of 2021 demonstrates that they can equally contribute to the alleviation of the ravages of the pandemic in the Global South with little cost to themselves.

To ignore the drowning children – probably because they are not our compatriots and do not fall within the realm of those we should care for – when they most need our assistance is to detract from our moral obligation to make the world a secure space for everyone to flourish.

But there is an economic reason for why wealthier nations should care about the inoculation of the global precariat: If the pandemic is not brought under control everywhere global economic prosperity will decline and both rich and poor nations will suffer as a result. Supply chains will be disrupted. Of course, the poorest will degenerate further, but even the richest nations will feel the heat. Indeed it is estimated that, devoid of the global distribution of vaccines, high-income nations and regions will lose \$119 billion annually; and, globally, over \$1.2 trillion will be lost. Needless to say, the coronavirus is a global problem and its solution lies in collaboration amongst rich and poor nations. The tendency to project it as a national or regional conundrum alone which requires national or regional competition stokes animosity.

Because we are all in the same boat, we must care not so much about our nations but about our shared planet. For not only do we have moral obligations that extend beyond our kith and kin, we cannot prosper economically and collectively if the lives of some are considered unworthy of life. Rather than fight like elephants to dominate the world and leave the poor destitute, wealthy nations could defuse their energy in more productive, positive, ways. The challenge, then, is to persuade our governments to contribute their fair share to alleviate the plight of the global precariat in these extremely excruciating times.

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