

MEDIA RELEASE

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COVID-19 second anniversary: vaccine injustice continues as millions die in low-income countries and variants spread

Friday March 11 marks the second anniversary of the World Health Organisation (WHO) declaration of the COVID-19 pandemic.

As we enter the third pandemic year, Australians are celebrating high rates of triple vaccination and emergence from lockdowns. But in low-income countries, [only 4% have had two vaccine doses](#), millions are dying and new variants continue to develop. There is even less access to the new COVID-19 [treatments](#) and tests. Under World Trade Organisation (WTO) intellectual property rules, a few pharmaceutical companies control the supplies and prices of these lifesaving medicines, and have sold most vaccines and treatments to rich countries.

The WTO has missed its self-imposed deadline of the end of February to decide on a [proposal](#) from India and South Africa, supported by over 100 countries. The proposal would temporarily waive WTO rules for intellectual property monopolies on COVID-19 vaccines, treatments and tests. This would enable the vast increase in production at affordable prices that is needed to triple vaccinate the world, treat those with the disease and prevent the spread of new variants.

The proposal is still being blocked by the UK, EU and Switzerland, [lobbied by pharmaceutical companies](#) like Pfizer who have already made [tens of billions in revenue](#) from vaccines [developed with government funding](#).

Asia Coordination Lead at ActionAid, **Maneesh Pradhan**, said: "We urgently need a waiver on the monopolies pharmaceutical companies hold on COVID-19 vaccines and treatments. Many countries in Asia are far behind the WHO target to vaccinate 70% of the population of all countries by mid-2022. Over 1.3 million people have already lost their lives in Asia and the Middle East. We welcome Australia's support of the TRIPS waiver, but Australia should do more to encourage other wealthy countries to support its passage at the WTO. The waiver should not be limited to vaccines but also include diagnostics and therapeutics. Otherwise, vaccine apartheid will continue."

Steering Committee Member of the Peoples Vaccine Alliance Asia, **Saima Zia**, said: "Rich countries must take immediate action and waive intellectual property rules on life-saving COVID-19 technologies. The quickest way out of this pandemic is allowing Global south countries to manufacture their own vaccines, tests and treatments. A charity approach to the COVID-19 pandemic is too little, too late."

Associate Professor **Deborah Gleeson**, representative of the Public Health Association of Australia (PHAA), said: "It's a great shame that two years into the pandemic, rich countries are continuing to hold out on waiving intellectual property rules for COVID-19 vaccines, treatments and tests. Equitable access to these life-saving products is needed urgently to bring the pandemic to an end."

AFTINET convener **Dr Patricia Ranald** said: "The WTO has yet again missed its own deadline to address this global injustice. As the pandemic enters its third year, the WTO has lost credibility by allowing a few governments to put corporate profits above human lives. The waiver must be approved swiftly to enable access to vaccines, treatments and tests in low-income countries."

Médecins Sans Frontières Australia's Head of Programs **Simon Eccleshall** said "The COVID-19 pandemic is an unprecedented global emergency that has already claimed more than six million lives over the last three years. It's critical that we do everything possible to speed up access to lifesaving medical tools."

Oxfam Australia Chief Executive, **Lyn Morgain**, said: "As we enter the third year of the pandemic, governments in rich countries are continuing to give big pharmaceutical companies free rein to prioritise profits ahead of vaccine equity. Our report, [The Pandemic of Greed](#), shows that since the waiver was proposed in 2020, 16 million people have died worldwide. Rich countries like Australia must urgently take action to ensure the approval of the TRIPS waiver so poorer countries can manufacture or access their own life-saving vaccines and technologies."

Ry Atkinson, Strategic Campaigner at Amnesty International Australia, said, "Two years into this pandemic, and for many countries, it must feel like day one. While people are dying, countries such as Germany and the UK are more interested in the bottom line of a few pharmaceutical companies, with Australia all but willing to play along. It's past

time Australia got off the fence and co-sponsored the TRIPS waiver, and world leaders stood up to the greed of big pharma."

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