



# Global South urges rich countries: Lift monopolies on COVID-19 medical products

**Geneva, 16th February:** Ahead of critical talks at the World Trade Organization (WTO) civil society and trade unions from the Global South are calling on rich countries' leaders to stop blocking a proposal to waive certain intellectual property rights on COVID-19 vaccines and other medical products.

This landmark proposal to temporarily suspend the application and enforcement of certain intellectual property obligations under the WTO Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS Agreement), or the “TRIPS waiver” is to facilitate the effective prevention, containment, and treatment of COVID-19.

Developing countries have stressed that the “TRIPS waiver” is an essential starting point for countries to ramp up and diversify the production of therapeutics, vaccines and other medical products needed to address the global pandemic.

However, a handful of countries — mostly those who have a stake in the protection of monopoly-based pharmaceutical industry — including the European Union, the United States, Japan, Switzerland, and Canada, have been blocking the waiver.

Over 200 organizations from three continents and more than 40 countries across the Global South have written to the European Commission and leaders of rich countries, including the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, France, Spain, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Denmark, Canada, Japan, and Australia urging them to unconditionally support the proposal.

“The pandemic has demanded extraordinary sacrifices from workers around the world. These political leaders are risking the lives of millions of workers simply to appease Big Pharma. These rules ensure big pharma has a monopoly over the production and supply, and can artificially limit supply and dictate high prices, which will consume public finances required for a healthy recovery. The only responsible thing to do is to make essential COVID-19 medical products especially vaccines accessible. We need the TRIPS waiver for this,” said Rosa Pavanelli, General Secretary of Public Services International, a global union federation representing 30 million workers across the world, including healthcare workers.

The Director-General of the World Health Organization, Dr. Tedros Adhanom has stressed the need for massive scale-up in production and sharing of technology and data to ensure global equitable access. Intellectual property rules allow pharmaceutical companies to prevent other manufacturers from producing COVID-19 vaccines and medicines, impeding the scale up of much needed production and artificially limiting competition and creating supply constraints.

“It makes little sense that the United States, the European Union, Canada, Japan, the United Kingdom, Norway, Australia, are blocking the proposal at the World Trade Organization that would allow them, and the rest of the world, to get more of the vaccines and treatments we all need,” says T Sundaraman, Global Coordinator of the People's Health Movement, the international network of



grassroots health organisations and practitioners active in more than 80 countries. “Access to the COVID-19 medical products is critical to control the pandemic because nobody is safe until everybody is safe,” he stresses.

Rich countries have argued that they are facilitating access by supporting the COVID-19 Vaccines Global Access (COVAX) facility, but this mechanism itself is struggling to obtain sufficient amounts to vaccinate even just 3% of the population of low and middle-income countries. This meagre level of vaccination is simply not enough to break the chain of transmission. Current vaccine shortages in developing and least developed countries expose the crisis of limited supply — currently mostly in the hands of rich countries — and the need to diversify and expand the manufacturing of vaccines and therapeutics.

“Developed countries by blocking the adoption of the waiver proposal at the WTO are failing in their human rights obligations”, says Chee Yoke Ling, Executive Director of the Third World Network, an international policy research and advocacy organisation. “COVID-19 medical products especially vaccines and medicines are the results of substantial public investments and contributions of people who participated in clinical trials — the riskiest part of product development — and should be treated as global public goods, and any intellectual property requirements on them should be automatically waived.”

A series of WTO meetings are in the pipeline to discuss and hopefully finalise the wording of the waiver.

The [TRIPS waiver](#) has the support of the vast majority of developing countries and is also supported by the [World Health Organization](#), [UN Human Rights Experts](#), [UNITAID](#), [UNAIDS](#). The opposition by a few high income countries is undermining global efforts to control COVID-19 and endangering the lives of billions of people.

\*\*\*END\*\*\*

Media Contacts:

1. Susana Barria, Public Services International (PSI) <[susana.barria@world-psi.org](mailto:susana.barria@world-psi.org)>
2. Gargeya Telakapalli, People's Health Movement (PHM) <[gargeya.t@phmovement.org](mailto:gargeya.t@phmovement.org)>
3. Sangeeta Shashikant, Third World Network (TWN) <[sangeeta@twnetwork.org](mailto:sangeeta@twnetwork.org)>