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Covid-19: Freedom won't last if UK doesn't share excess vaccine doses, aid agencies warn

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Freedom from covid-19 restrictions will be short lived if the UK fails to share its huge supply of vaccine doses with low income countries, Unicef and Wellcome have warned the prime minister.¹

In an open letter to Boris Johnson the organisations said the UK had secured access to enough doses to vaccinate the entire UK population twice over, while other countries still did not have enough to vaccinate their healthcare workers and the most vulnerable groups.

The UK must now “show the historic leadership needed to end this crisis” and share at least 20% of its available doses between now and August, they said, and should call on the other G7 countries to commit to sharing one billion doses in 2021 and to fully fund the Access to Covid-19 Tools (ACT) Accelerator, launched by the World Health Organisation to accelerate the development of tests, treatments, and vaccines and to ensure their equitable distribution.

The call came after WHO said that despite commitments from countries’ leaders a funding gap of \$18.5bn (£13.1bn; €15.1bn) for the accelerator remained and that Covax, the initiative that distributes vaccines to poor countries, had little stock.²

“As long as the virus continues to circulate, it will continue to mutate. We have already seen first-hand how quickly new variants can emerge and travel. We cannot rule out variants against which our vaccines and treatments no longer work,” the letter said. It said that Covax was currently 190 million doses short of where it needed to be and that deals secured by rich countries such as the UK meant they were the only ones that could currently make doses available.

“We can share vaccines now and still meet UK vaccination targets. The truth is, the UK cannot afford not to share its vaccines. The world won’t be safe while any single country is still fighting the virus. Failing to act now risks reversing our hard-won progress,” the letter said.

Speaking at a meeting of the G7 health ministers on 3 June, WHO’s director general, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, said Covax needed 100 million doses in June and July and 250 million by September. The G7, of which the UK has taken on presidency in 2021, will meet on 11-13 June.

\$50bn plan to end pandemic

The International Monetary Fund has set out a \$50bn plan to end the covid-19 pandemic, including a target to vaccinate at least 40% of the population in all countries in 2021 and at least 60% in the first half of 2022.³ The plan relies on ensuring widespread testing

and tracing, maintaining adequate stocks of therapeutics, and enforcing public health measures in places where vaccine coverage is low.

The IMF’s report said, “Building on the budgeting of the ACT Accelerator, we estimate the cost of this proposal to be around \$50 billion, which is small compared to the potential benefits of a faster end to the pandemic, estimated at around \$9 trillion. Moreover, advanced economies stand to gain around \$1 trillion in additional tax revenues, which means that funding this proposal may possibly be the highest-return public investment ever.”

Vaccine pledges

Recently, some rich countries have announced new pledges to share vaccine doses. The US has announced that it will share 80 million doses with other countries by the end of June, and from the first batch of 25 million doses 19 million will be shared through Covax.⁴

Meanwhile, France has donated 184 000 doses of the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine to Senegal,⁵ and Spain announced a donation of 15 million doses to Latin America—both through Covax.⁶

- 1 Our open letter to the UK prime minister, Boris Johnson. Wellcome. 4 Jun 2021. <https://wellcome.org/news/our-open-letter-uk-prime-minister-boris-johnson>.
- 2 Mahase E. Covid-19: Rich countries are putting “relationships with big pharma” ahead of ending pandemic, says Oxfam. *BMJ* 2021;373:n1342. doi: 10.1136/bmj.n1342 pmid: 34035051
- 3 A proposal to end the covid-19 pandemic. IMF. 19 May 2021. <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/Staff-Discussion-Notes/Issues/2021/05/19/A-Proposal-to-End-the-COVID-19-Pandemic-460263>.
- 4 Bekiempis V. Joe Biden outlines plan to share 80m Covid vaccine doses with world. *Guardian*. 3 Jun 2021. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/jun/03/biden-outlines-global-covid-vaccine-sharing-plan>.
- 5 France donates 184 000 AstraZeneca doses to Senegal via COVAX. *Reuters*. 3 Jun 2021. <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/france-donates-184000-astrazeneca-doses-senegal-via-covax-2021-06-03>.
- 6 Spain to donate 15 million Covid-19 vaccine doses to Latin America. *La Prensa Latina*. 2 Jun 2021. <https://www.laprensa-latina.com/spain-to-donate-15-million-covid-19-vaccine-doses-to-latin-america>.