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Covid-19: Drug companies urged to share vaccine technology to boost equity and access

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Campaigners including the head of the World Health Organization have urged pharmaceutical companies to share technology and knowledge in order to improve covid-19 vaccine equity and access.

WHO director general Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus and representatives from the People's Vaccine Alliance are presenting shareholder resolutions on behalf of Oxfam at the annual general meetings of Moderna, Pfizer, and Johnson & Johnson.¹⁻³

Abby Maxman, president of Oxfam America, said, "Moderna, Pfizer, and Johnson & Johnson have prioritised short term profit making over long term sustainability and reputational risks, as well as public health needs. The flawed donation based model has produced vast vaccine inequity, despite the desire, willingness, and ability of countries around the world to produce their own doses for their own citizens."

Oxfam America has some stocks in the companies in order to be able to raise matters of vaccine equity as shareholder resolutions. It filed the resolutions because—a year after the introduction of highly effective vaccines—74% of people in high income countries are fully vaccinated compared with just 12% of people in low income countries.

The resolutions to Moderna and Pfizer call on the companies to analyse the feasibility of promptly transferring intellectual property and technical knowledge to facilitate the production of covid-19 vaccine doses by manufacturers located in low and middle income countries.

Moderna has committed not to enforce its covid-19 vaccine patents during the pandemic but other manufacturers cannot produce Moderna's vaccine quickly without full technology transfer. WHO has set up a mRNA vaccine technology transfer hub to facilitate technology transfer but says Moderna has not responded to requests to share knowledge.

Speaking to Moderna shareholders in a pre-recorded statement, Tedros said, "If Moderna worked with us, we could submit the technology transfer hub's vaccine for approval at least one year sooner, which would save lives, decrease the risk of variants, and reduce the pandemic's economic toll."

"We urge Moderna to share technology and knowledge with the WHO hub and commit to not enforcing patents for covid-19 and other essential vaccines in countries hosting the WHO hub and spokes. We also urge them to offer training to scientists working on those efforts through the Moderna mRNA access programme."

Although Pfizer and BioNTech entered into an agreement with Biovac in July 2021 for sterile "fill and finish" of their mRNA vaccine this falls short of what's

needed to promote vaccine equity, Oxfam said. Although doses produced under the agreement will be allocated to African countries, the arrangement does not allow Biovac to develop the expertise needed to manufacture the vaccine's active ingredient or to make other mRNA vaccines to ensure adequate supply in future pandemics. And because construction will not begin on BioNTech's planned Rwandan manufacturing facility until mid 2022 and production capacity will ramp up gradually, it will not ameliorate near term supply challenges.

The resolution presented to Johnson & Johnson shareholders calls for transparency on how the company determines pricing for its covid-19 vaccines in light of the substantial government funding the company received. The company has been distributing its covid-19 vaccine on a "non-profit" basis but that commitment is limited to "emergency pandemic use" and it is not clear when that ends.

Presenting the resolution, Maaza Seyoum, global south convener, People's Vaccine Alliance, said, "Johnson & Johnson's covid-19 vaccine has protected people against severe illness and saved lives—yet the company has not done enough to ensure equitable access and transparency about its pricing strategy, despite the massive investment of \$1.5bn in public funds the company received."

- 1 Supporting statement. Pfizer. https://webassets.oxfamamerica.org/media/documents/Pfizer_Tech_Transfer_Proposal.pdf.
- 2 Supporting statement. Moderna. https://webassets.oxfamamerica.org/media/documents/Moderna_Tech_Transfer_Proposal.pdf.
- 3 Supporting statement. Johnson & Johnson. https://webassets.oxfamamerica.org/media/documents/Johnson_Johnson_COVID-19_Pricing_Transparency_Proposal.pdf.

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