Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

CABINET STATEMENT

Written Statement: Statement about vaccine equity

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First published: 1 June 2022

Last updated: 1 June 2022

I am pleased to be making this statement today about vaccine equity, at the same time as my Scottish Government counterpart Neil Gray, the Minister for International Development.

Since the world's first Covid-19 vaccine was administered in the UK in December 2020, more than 139m doses have been administered as part of the largest ever vaccination programme in UK history. The impact of this achievement is monumental.

In Wales, it is estimated that around 7,000 deaths and 10,000 hospital admissions have been prevented as a result of the vaccination programme. Thanks to the success of our vaccination programme, we are now in the fortunate position in Wales – and throughout the UK – to be able to move beyond the emergency response to the pandemic and learn to live safely with coronavirus.

However, it is important to be clear that the pandemic is not yet over and it remains uncertain how the virus may develop in the future. Ensuring vaccines are available to everyone, everywhere, is critical to ending the pandemic as quickly as possible.

Vaccination rates for first and second doses remain low in many countries across the globe. As of 16 May 2022, only 13% of people in low-income countries have received two doses of a Covid-19 vaccine.

In Malawi, one of Scotland's International Development Fund partner countries, only 5% of people have received two doses. In Namibia, where the Welsh Government supports a strong partnership between Cardiff University and the University of Namibia, the vaccination rate is 20%.

This is why, today, the Scottish and Welsh governments are standing in solidarity with our Global South partners to continue to push for meaningful progress on creating the conditions for equitable access to Covid-19 vaccines.

Without equitable access, many countries will continue to experience high levels of severe illness and deaths from Covid-19. This will put significant pressure on healthcare systems, disrupt much-needed economic recovery and leave the world's most vulnerable people exposed to an increased risk of poverty and hunger.

Without high-levels of vaccination at a global level, the SARS-CoV-2 virus may continue to mutate, cross borders, and potentially undermine the efficacy of our Covid-19 vaccines and treatments, including here in the UK. Ensuring equitable access to vaccines is not only a moral imperative, but is critical to safeguarding global health security.

So far, bilateral donations and funding to COVAX have formed a central pillar of the global pandemic response. The UK Government's participation in COVAX has been an important step in enabling other nations to access Covid-19 vaccines. And we commend the government for all donations already delivered and further donations they have committed to.

However, globally, contributions to COVAX have fallen short of initial funding commitments. In addition, the unpredictability, and late delivery of doses has undermined effective planning for their administration in many recipient countries.

Crucially, vaccine donations are unlikely to support vaccine supply-chain sustainability. This is why it is critical to expand production capacity to enable countries to foster long-term vaccine self-sufficiency.

On 12 May, the United States, Belize, Germany, Indonesia, and Senegal co-hosted the Second Global Covid-19 summit, to assess progress made on addressing the pandemic and identify action needed to tackle Covid-19. While the summit secured $3bn in new funding commitments, this figure falls short of the estimated $31.1bn needed to end the pandemic. It is clear that meeting this unprecedented challenge will require a more innovative and ambitious approach.

As part of this solution, more than 100 countries have called for the temporary suspension of international obligations to protect intellectual property rights, defined under the World Trade Organisation (WTO) TRIPS agreement, in relation to Covid-19 vaccines. This temporary waiver would allow for the expansion of critical access to patents necessary to safely and efficiently manufacture Covid-19 vaccines in developing countries. Yet, despite growing global support, and a compromise solution being tabled between the EU, US, India and South Africa, a waiver continues to be opposed by a small group of predominantly high-income countries, including the UK.

Our statement today builds on letters sent by the First Minister of Scotland and the First Minister of Wales to the Prime Minister in December 2021 urging support for a temporary TRIPS waiver.

We want to make clear that our governments support a temporary TRIPS waiver that will enable diversification in the production of Covid-19 vaccines. Ongoing negotiations at the WTO present the opportunity for a comprehensive TRIPS waiver to be agreed at the upcoming Ministerial Conference in June.

We strongly urge the UK Government to drop its opposition to a waiver and support the global effort to reach a meaningful agreement.

Agreeing a TRIPS waiver could potentially make the production of life-saving vaccines accessible to a broader range of countries and protect billions of people in the world's most vulnerable countries.

Countries in the Global South need support to address logistical challenges, which may prevent vaccines from reaching people's arms. Our two governments have collectively provided more than £7m to help address such challenges in our partner countries. This includes £4.2m from the Scottish Government to support equitable access to Covid-19 vaccines and therapeutics in Zambia, Malawi and Rwanda and

£3.2m from the Welsh Government to support public information campaigns, handwashing and improved access to oxygen in a number of sub-Saharan African countries.

We encourage the international community to continue to provide technical and logistical support, so vaccines can be delivered and administered efficiently, safely and equitably.

We urge global partners to prioritise equitable access to Covid-19 vaccines as a central pillar in our combined response to the global pandemic.

We will continue to call on the UK government to drop their opposition to the TRIPS waiver. We have a collective responsibility to do this and now is the time to act.