

Vaccines for All: Equitable Access to Covid-19 Vaccines Needed Urgently



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It was Christmas Day amid this miserable pandemic, perhaps the most uncelebrated Christmas ever since Jesus was born. Pope Francis in his annual address appealed to all nations of the world:

"I ask everyone — government leaders, businesses, international organizations — to foster cooperation and not competition, and to seek a solution for everyone: Vaccines for all, especially for the most vulnerable and needy of all regions of the planet."

Indeed, global vaccine procurements today are not equitable at all. While some high-income swiftly-acting countries hoarded effective and safe vaccine doses sufficient to cover their whole population more than three times, other low-income countries did not have any. The UK, US, Canada, EU and Israel quickly began inoculating their citizens from December last year and now up to 40% of their populations have received their first doses of Covid-19 vaccine. However, some countries in Africa and South-east Asia still do not know when they can start the first jab. G20 leaders have declared that the world would "spare no effort to ensure their [Covid-

19 vaccines and therapeutics] affordable and equitable access for all people,” but the real-life effect of these beautiful words seems rarely found.

The call for actions is not only from religious or humanitarian motivations. This contagious disease, if not ended at the same time all around the world, will emerge again and again every time a country opens its border. This means that the global value chain and free movement of labor force cannot be reinstated in the near future, which will inevitably delay the recovery of the world economy all together. By the estimation of the Economist Intelligence Unit, the vast majority of sub-Saharan Africa, South and Central Asia will not be able to achieve widespread vaccination until early 2023. If this gloomy forecast is proven correct, international business and travel will have to wait at least two more years to fully recover.

The broken value chain, of course, affects high-income countries even if they are expected to achieve herd immunity by the end of this year. One study funded by the International Chamber of Commerce argues that the advanced economies would lose up to 49 percent of the global economic cost incurred by the ongoing pandemic during the year, meaning they lose 3.7 percent of their GDPs if the inequitable distribution of vaccines continues.

The situation is similar in Korea. Although the government aims to inoculate 70% of its population by the end of 2021, the delay in economic recovery worldwide may hamper the growth engine of the Korean economy as well. The share of exports in Korea's GDP is over 40 percent, and many businesses increasingly rely on immigrant laborers nowadays. In particular, small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in construction, agriculture and manufacturing sectors are found to have difficulties operating their business due to the limited entry of foreign workers. A recent survey conducted by the Korea Federation of SMEs reveals that 64.1 percent of respondents who run their own SMEs are facing production reduction due to labor shortage immediately, and 96.5 percent think they will do so in a few months. If the situation in low-income countries does not improve any time soon, especially in Central or Southeast Asia where many immigrants to Korea originate, the Korean economy will also tumble for the time being.

Therefore, Korea, along with other international partners, should work harder toward the equitable distribution of Covid-19 vaccines. One way to do this is through engaging in the COVAX Facility more actively. The COVAX Facility is run by the WHO, Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunisation (GAVI), and Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations (CEPI) to facilitate international cooperation and enhance the accessibility of mid- to low-income countries to Covid-19 vaccines. COVAX is planning to supply around 330 million doses of AstraZeneca/Oxford and Pfizer-BioN Tech vaccines to 145 countries, 92 of which have not secured any doses

except through COVAX. Although Korea has participated in this program by pre-ordering 20 million doses of vaccines and donating 10 million dollars, more active involvement would have been ideal. For example the UK and Canada donated 706 million and 246 million dollars respectively, and the EU, France, Germany and Japan also donated 120–130 million dollars to COVAX. In addition to financial support, Korea can boost the supply of COVAX vaccines to low-income countries by waiving the next allocations of its share, as Korea has secured more than enough vaccines through individual contracts.

While it is obvious that Korea's cooperation for equitable access to Covid-19 vaccines is needed for an early end of the pandemic in the first place, it can also be utilized to extend the diplomatic influence of Korea. Russia and China, which developed their own Covid-19 vaccines, are now selling or donating them to low-income countries as a means to increase their scope of economic or diplomatic cooperation. Canada, New Zealand and the EU have been preparing a procedure to distribute their unused vaccine doses to neighboring, mostly poor, countries, which will improve their prestige in the international community.

The Korean economy has grown to a size on par with the G7 countries and its influence was enlarged last year when it successfully contained coronavirus outbreaks with swift and creative actions. Now it is time we need to act for the equitable distribution of safe and effective Covid-19 vaccines, for the world and for us at the same time. [KIEP](#)