



The Pandemic is Us (But Now Mostly Them)

Power, Wealth and Justice in the Time of COVID-19¹

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Almost two years ago, the SARS-CoV-2 virus unleashed COVID-19. Since then, the virus has killed more than 3.8 million people worldwide (and possibly many more).² Finally, a return to normalcy seems likely for a distinct minority of the world's people, those living mainly in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, the European Union and China.³ That's not surprising. The concentration of wealth and power globally has enabled rich countries to all but monopolize available

¹ This article was first published by *TomDispatch* (<https://tomdispatch.com/the-pandemic-is-us-but-now-mostly-them/>) on June 20, 2021, and is republished with permission from *TomDispatch* and Rajan Menon.

² Sullivan, Becky. "New Study Estimates More Than 900,000 People Have Died Of Covid-19 In U.S." NPR. May 6, 2021. [www.npr.org](https://www.npr.org/sections/coronavirus-live-updates/2021/05/06/994287048/new-study-estimates-more-than-900-000-people-have-died-of-covid-19-in-u-s). Web. <https://www.npr.org/sections/coronavirus-live-updates/2021/05/06/994287048/new-study-estimates-more-than-900-000-people-have-died-of-covid-19-in-u-s>

³ "China: WHO Coronavirus disease (Covid-19) dashboard with vaccination data." World Health Organization. [www.who.int](https://covid19.who.int/region/wpro/country/cn). Web. <https://covid19.who.int/region/wpro/country/cn>, accessed July 10, 2021.

vaccine doses. For the citizens of low-income and poor countries to have long-term pandemic security, especially the 46 percent of the world's population who survive on less than \$5.50 a day⁴, this inequity must end, rapidly — but don't hold your breath.

The Global North: normalcy returns

In the United States, new daily infections, which peaked in early January 2021, had plummeted 96 percent within six months, by June 16.⁵ The daily death toll also dropped — by 92 percent — and the consequences were apparent. Big-city streets were bustling again, as shops and restaurants became ever busier. Americans were shedding their reluctance to travel by plane or train, and schools and universities prepared to resume “live instruction” in the fall.⁶ Zoom catch-ups were yielding to socializing the old-fashioned way.

By that June day, new infections and deaths had fallen substantially below their peaks in other wealthy parts of the world as well. In Canada,⁷ cases had dropped by 89 percents, deaths by 94 percent; in Europe by 87 percent and 87 percent, respectively;⁸ and in the United Kingdom by 84 percent and 99 percent.⁹

⁴ “Nearly Half the World Lives on Less than \$5.50 a Day.” World Bank. [www.worldbank.org](https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2018/10/17/nearly-half-the-world-lives-on-less-than-550-a-day). Web. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2018/10/17/nearly-half-the-world-lives-on-less-than-550-a-day>, accessed July 11, 2021.

⁵ Bhatia, Gurman, et al. “United States: the Latest Coronavirus Counts, Charts and Maps.” Thomson Reuters. [www.reuters.com](https://graphics.reuters.com/world-coronavirus-tracker-and-maps/countries-and-territories/united-states/). Web. <https://graphics.reuters.com/world-coronavirus-tracker-and-maps/countries-and-territories/united-states/>, accessed July 10, 2021.

⁶ Whitmore, Geoff. “Increase In Travel Is Causing Travel Prices To Rise.” Forbes. www.forbes.com. Web. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/geoffwhitmore/2021/05/27/increase-in-travel-is-causing-travel-prices-to-rise/?sh=5c97fcf874c1>, accessed June 30, 2021.

⁷ “Canada Coronavirus Map and Case Count.” *The New York Times*. April 22, 2020. www.nytimes.com. Web. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/world/canada-covid-cases.html>.

⁸ Bhatia, Gurman, et al. “Coronavirus in Europe: The Latest Counts, Charts and Maps.” Thomson Reuters. July 10, 2021. [www.reuters.com](https://graphics.reuters.com/world-coronavirus-tracker-and-maps/regions/europe/). Web. <https://graphics.reuters.com/world-coronavirus-tracker-and-maps/regions/europe/>.

⁹ “United Kingdom Coronavirus Map and Case Count.” *The New York Times*. April 16, 2020. www.nytimes.com. Web. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/world/united-kingdom-covid-cases.html>.

Yes, European governments were warier¹⁰ than the U.S. about giving people the green light to resume their pre-pandemic lifestyles; as of late July, countries “across the pond” have yet to fully abolish curbs¹¹ on social congregation and traveling. Perhaps recalling Britain’s previous winter surge, thanks to the B.1.1.7¹² mutation (initially discovered there) and the recent appearance of two other virulent strains of Covid-19, B.1.167¹³ and B.1.617.2¹⁴ (both first detected in India), 10 Downing Street has retained restrictions on social gatherings. The government even put off¹⁵ a full reopening on June 21, as previously planned. And that couldn’t have been more understandable; after all, by June 17, the new case count had reached 10,809,¹⁶ the highest since late March. Still, new daily infections in Britain are less than one-tenth what they were in early January.¹⁷ So, like the U.S., Britain and the rest of Europe are returning to some semblance of normalcy, although handling restrictions differently in many instances.

The Global South: a long road ahead

Lately, the place that’s been hit the hardest by Covid-19 is the Global South, where less-affluent countries are particularly ill-prepared.

¹⁰ Mueller, Benjamin, and Marc Santora. “As Vaccines Turn Pandemic’s Tide, U.S. and Europe Diverge on Path Forward.” *The New York Times*. June 5, 2021. [www.nytimes.com](https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/05/world/europe/us-covid-vaccines.html?referringSource=articleShare). Web. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/05/world/europe/us-covid-vaccines.html?referringSource=articleShare>.

¹¹ “The travel restrictions in place in every country in Europe.” *euronews*. July 6, 2021. [www.euronews.com](https://www.euronews.com/travel/2021/07/02/what-s-the-latest-on-european-travel-restrictions). Web. <https://www.euronews.com/travel/2021/07/02/what-s-the-latest-on-european-travel-restrictions>.

¹² Firestone M. J., et al. First Identified Cases of SARS-CoV-2 Variant B.1.1.7 in Minnesota — December 2020–January 2021. *MMWR. Morb Mortal Wkly Rep* 2021;70:278–279. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.mm7008e1external>.

¹³ Vaidyanathan, Gayathri. “Coronavirus variants are spreading in India — what scientists know so far.” *Nature News*. May 11, 2021. [www.nature.com](https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-021-01274-7). Web. <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-021-01274-7>.

¹⁴ Wall, Emma C., et al. “Neutralising Antibody Activity against Sars-Cov-2 Vocs B.1.617.2 and B.1.351 by Bnt162b2 Vaccination.” *The Lancet* 397, no. 10292 (2021/06/19/ 2021): 2331–33.

¹⁵ Gayle, Damien. “End of England Covid lockdown on 21 June increasingly in doubt.” *The Guardian*. May 31, 2021. [www.theguardian.com](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/may/31/end-of-england-covid-lockdown-on-21-june-increasingly-in-doubt). Web. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/may/31/end-of-england-covid-lockdown-on-21-june-increasingly-in-doubt>.

¹⁶ “United Kingdom Coronavirus Map and Case Count.” *The New York Times*. April 16, 2020. [www.nytimes.com](https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/world/united-kingdom-covid-cases.html). Web. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/world/united-kingdom-covid-cases.html>.

¹⁷ “United Kingdom Coronavirus Map and Case Count.” *The New York Times*. April 16, 2020. [www.nytimes.com](https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/world/united-kingdom-covid-cases.html). Web. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/world/united-kingdom-covid-cases.html>.

Consider social distancing. People with jobs that can be carried out by “working from home” constitute a far smaller proportion of the labor force than in wealthy nations with far higher levels of education, mechanization and automation. The Global South suffers far greater access to computers and the internet than those countries of the Global North. An estimated 40 percent of workers in rich countries are able to work remotely.¹⁸ In lower- and middle-income lands, perhaps 10 percent can do so, and the numbers are even worse in the poorest of them.

During the pandemic, millions of Canadians, Europeans and Americans lost their jobs and struggled to pay food and housing bills. Still, the economic impact has been far worse¹⁹ in other parts of the world, particularly the poorest African and Asian nations. There, some 100 million people have fallen into extreme poverty.²⁰

Such places of poverty lack the basics²¹ to prevent infections and care for Covid-19 patients. Running water, soap and hand sanitizer are often not readily available. In the developing world, 785 million or more people lack “basic water services,” according to information published by the World Health Organization (WHO) and UNICEF (United Nations International Children’s Education Fund),²² as do a

Lately, the place that’s been hit the hardest by Covid-19 is the Global South, where less-affluent countries are particularly ill-prepared.

¹⁸ Gottlieb, Charles, et al. “Working from home in developing countries.” VOXEU. March 18, 2021. www.voxeu.org. Web. <https://voxeu.org/article/working-home-developing-countries>, accessed July 11, 2021.

¹⁹ Kose, M. Ayhan, and Akihiko Nishio. “Covid-19 could leave lasting economic scars in the poorest countries; It’s in everyone’s best interest to act now.” World Bank. February 24, 2021. www.worldbank.org. Web. <https://blogs.worldbank.org/voices/covid-19-could-leave-lasting-economic-scars-poorest-countries-its-everyones-best-interest>, accessed July 11, 2021.

²⁰ Zumbrun, Josh. “Coronavirus Has Thrown Around 100 Million People into Extreme Poverty, World Bank Estimates.” *The Wall Street Journal*. October 7, 2020. www.wsj.com. Web. https://www.wsj.com/articles/coronavirus-has-thrown-around-100-million-people-into-extreme-poverty-world-bank-estimates-11602086400?mod=article_inline.

²¹ “Fact Sheet: Lack of handwashing with soap puts millions at increased risk to Covid-19 and other infectious diseases.” UNICEF. July 9, 2021. www.unicef.org. Web. <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/fact-sheet-lack-handwashing-soap-puts-millions-increased-risk-covid-19-and-other>.

²² “Global WASH Fast Facts.” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. April 1, 2021. www.cdc.gov. Web. https://www.cdc.gov/healthywater/global/wash_statistics.html.

quarter of health clinics and hospitals there,²³ which have also faced crippling shortages of standard protective gear,²⁴ never mind oxygen²⁵ and ventilators.²⁶

Last year, for instance, South Sudan, a country of 12 million people, had only four ventilators and 24 ICU beds. At the same time, in April 2020, Burkina Faso had 11 ventilators for its 20 million people; Sierra Leone 13 for its eight million; and the Central African Republic counted a mere three ventilators for eight million. The lack-of-resources problem wasn't confined to Africa, either. In South America, virtually all of Venezuela's hospitals have run low on critical supplies and the country had 84 ICU beds for nearly 30 million people.

Yes, wealthy countries like the U.S. faced significant shortages, but they had the cash to buy what they needed (or could ramp up production at home).²⁷ The Global South's poorest countries were — and still today — remain at the back of the queue.²⁸

India's disaster

India has provided the most chilling illustration of how spiraling infections can overwhelm healthcare systems in the Global South. Things looked surprisingly good there until recently. Infection and death rates were far below what experts

²³ "1 in 4 health care facilities lacks basic water services – UNICEF, WHO." UN International Children's Education Fund. July 7, 2021. [www.unicef.org](https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/1-4-health-care-facilities-lacks-basic-water-services-unicef-who). Web. <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/1-4-health-care-facilities-lacks-basic-water-services-unicef-who>.

²⁴ Gage, Anna, and Sebastian Bauhoff. "Health Systems in Low-Income Countries Will Struggle to Protect Health Workers from Covid-19." Center for Global Development. July 13, 2021. [www.cgdev.org](https://www.cgdev.org/blog/health-systems-low-income-countries-will-struggle-protect-health-workers-covid-19). Web. <https://www.cgdev.org/blog/health-systems-low-income-countries-will-struggle-protect-health-workers-covid-19>.

²⁵ Davies, Madlen, and Rosa Furneaux. "Oxygen shortages threaten 'total collapse' of dozens of health systems." *The Guardian*. May 25, 2021. [www.theguardian.com](https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2021/may/25/oxygen-shortages-threaten-total-collapse-of-dozens-of-health-systems). Web. <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2021/may/25/oxygen-shortages-threaten-total-collapse-of-dozens-of-health-systems>.

²⁶ Woodyatt, Amy. "The world is scrambling to buy ventilators in the Covid-19 pandemic. One country has only four of them – for 12 million people." CNN. April 18, 2020. [www.cnn.com](https://www.cnn.com/2020/04/18/af-rica/covid-19-ventilator-shortage-intl-scli/index.html). Web. <https://www.cnn.com/2020/04/18/af-rica/covid-19-ventilator-shortage-intl-scli/index.html>.

²⁷ Ranney, Megan L., et al. "Critical Supply Shortages — the Need for Ventilators and Personal Protective Equipment During the Covid-19 Pandemic." *New England Journal of Medicine* 382, no. 18 (2020): e41.

²⁸ Bradley, Jane. "In Scramble for Coronavirus Supplies, Rich Countries Push Poor Aside." *The New York Times*. April 9, 2020. [www.nytimes.com](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/09/world/coronavirus-equipment-rich-poor.html). Web. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/09/world/coronavirus-equipment-rich-poor.html>.

had anticipated based on the economy, population density and the highly uneven quality of its healthcare system.²⁹ The government's decision to order a phased lifting of a national lockdown seemed vindication indeed. As late as April 2021,³⁰ India reported fewer new cases per million than Britain, France, Germany, the U.K. or the U.S.

Never one for modesty, India's Hindu nationalist prime minister, Narendra Modi, boasted in late January this year that his country had "saved humanity from a great disaster by containing Corona effectively."³¹ He touted its progress in vaccination; bragged that India was now exporting masks, test kits and safety equipment; and mocked forecasts that Covid-19 would infect 800 million

Indians and kill a million of them. Confident that his country had turned the corner, he and his Bharatiya Janata Party held huge, unmasked political rallies,³² while millions of Indians gathered in vast crowds for the annual Kumbh Mela religious festival.³³

Then, just three months later, in early April, the second Covid-19 wave struck with horrific consequences. By May 6, the daily case count had reached 414,188. On May 19, it would realize a problematic milestone, breaking the global record for daily Covid-19 deaths — previously a dubious

Governments in rich countries weren't sure which vaccine manufacturers would succeed, so they spread their bets. Nevertheless, their stockpiling gambit locked up most of the global supply.

²⁹ Mohanan, Manoj, et al. "Quality of Health Care in India: Challenges, Priorities, and the Road Ahead." *Health Affairs* 35, no. 10 (2016): 1753–58.

³⁰ Ritchie, Hannah, et al. "Coronavirus (Covid-19) Cases - Statistics and Research." *Our World in Data*. March 5, 2020. [www.ourworldindata.org/covid-cases](https://ourworldindata.org/covid-cases). Web.

³¹ "English rendering of PM's address at the World Economic Forum's Davos Dialogue." Government of India, Prime Minister's Office, Press Information Bureau. January 28, 2021. [www.pib.ov.india](https://pib.gov.in/PressReleaseDetail.aspx?PRID=1693019). Web. <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleaseDetail.aspx?PRID=1693019>, accessed July 11, 2021.

³² Blair, Alex. "Indian Government Criticised for Praising Political Rallies Midway through Covid-19 Second Wave." *NewsComAu*. April 28, 2021. [www.news.com.au](https://www.news.com.au/world/coronavirus/india-an-government-criticised-for-praising-political-rallies-midway-through-covid19-second-wave/news-story/0ba15c5b0713b1bebf3f6a73429b037). Web. <https://www.news.com.au/world/coronavirus/india-an-government-criticised-for-praising-political-rallies-midway-through-covid19-second-wave/news-story/0ba15c5b0713b1bebf3f6a73429b037>.

³³ "India's deadly coronavirus surge follows crowded events." *Al Jazeera*. April 29, 2021. [www.aljazeera.com](https://www.aljazeera.com/gallery/2021/4/29/indias-deadly-virus-surge-follows-crowded-events). Web. <https://www.aljazeera.com/gallery/2021/4/29/indias-deadly-virus-surge-follows-crowded-events>.

American honor — recording almost 4,500 fatalities each day.³⁴

Hospitals quickly ran out of beds. The sick were turned away in droves and left to die at home or even in the streets, gasping for breath. Supplies of medical oxygen and ventilators ran out, as did personal protective equipment.³⁵ Soon, Modi had to appeal for help,³⁶ which many countries provided.³⁷

Indian press reports estimate that fully half of India's 300,000-plus Covid-19 deaths have occurred in this second wave, the vast majority after March 2021.³⁸ During the worst of it, the air in India's big cities was thick with smoke from crematoria,³⁹ while, because of the shortage of designated cremation and burial sites, corpses regularly washed up on riverbanks.⁴⁰

We may never know how many Indians have actually died since April. Hospital records, even assuming they were kept fastidiously amid the pandemonium, won't provide the full picture because an unknown number of people died elsewhere.⁴¹

³⁴ Slater, Joanna. "In India, the deadliest day for any country since the pandemic began." *The Washington Post*. May 19, 2021. [www.washingtonpost.com. Web. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/india-deadliest-covid-day/2021/05/19/2452925c-b89a-11eb-bc4a-62849cf6cca9_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/india-deadliest-covid-day/2021/05/19/2452925c-b89a-11eb-bc4a-62849cf6cca9_story.html).

³⁵ Nundy, Surajit. "Covid-19 in India: Oxygen supplies run low, hospital fees run high." *BMJ Opinion*. May 17, 2021. [www.bmj.com. Web. https://blogs.bmj.com/bmj/2021/05/07/covid-19-in-india-oxygen-supplies-run-low-hospital-fees-run-high/](https://blogs.bmj.com/bmj/2021/05/07/covid-19-in-india-oxygen-supplies-run-low-hospital-fees-run-high/).

³⁶ Roche, Elizabeth. "New Delhi to accept foreign aid to deal with Covid-19 pandemic crisis." *Mint*. April 1, 2020. [www.livemint.com. Web. https://www.livemint.com/news/india/covid-19-india-decides-to-accept-foreign-aid-to-deal-with-pandemic-crisis-11585748039556.html](https://www.livemint.com/news/india/covid-19-india-decides-to-accept-foreign-aid-to-deal-with-pandemic-crisis-11585748039556.html).

³⁷ Yeung, Jessie. "As India breaks another global Covid-19 record and hospitals run out of oxygen, countries pledge assistance and aid." *CNN*. April 27, 2021. [www.cnn.com. Web. https://www.cnn.com/2021/04/26/india/india-covid-international-aid-intl-hnk/index.html](https://www.cnn.com/2021/04/26/india/india-covid-international-aid-intl-hnk/index.html).

³⁸ Sinha, Amitabh. "3 Lakh Covid-19 Deaths in India: How far is the second wave peak?" *The Indian Express*. June 1, 2021. [www.indianexpress.com. Web. https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/india-covid-situation-coronavirus-deaths-how-far-is-peak-7328929/](https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/india-covid-situation-coronavirus-deaths-how-far-is-peak-7328929/).

³⁹ Tomlinson, Hugh. "Delhi wreathed in smoke as Covid crematoria burn day and night." *The Times*. April 24, 2021. [www.thetimes.co.uk. Web. https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/delhi-wreathed-in-smoke-as-covid-crematoria-burn-day-and-night-mpvbx7s5g](https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/delhi-wreathed-in-smoke-as-covid-crematoria-burn-day-and-night-mpvbx7s5g).

⁴⁰ Das, Krishna. "Bodies of Covid-19 victims among those dumped in India's Ganges – govt document." Thomson Reuters. May 15, 2021. [www.reuters.com. Web. https://www.reuters.com/world/india/bodies-covid-19-victims-among-those-dumped-indias-ganges-govt-document-2021-05-15/](https://www.reuters.com/world/india/bodies-covid-19-victims-among-those-dumped-indias-ganges-govt-document-2021-05-15/).

⁴¹ Rather, Shaiba. "From Confidence to Chaos: India's Journey to Its Coronavirus Crisis." *Lawfare*. May 17, 2021. [www.lawfareblog.com. Web. https://www.lawfareblog.com/confidence-chaos-indias-journey-its-coronavirus-crisis](https://www.lawfareblog.com/confidence-chaos-indias-journey-its-coronavirus-crisis).

The vaccination divide

Other parts of the Global South have also been hit by surging infections, including countries in Asia that had previously contained Covid-19's spread, among them Malaysia, Nepal, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Vietnam.⁴² Latin America⁴³ has seen devastating surges of the pandemic, above all in Brazil because of President Jair Bolsonaro's stunning combination of fecklessness and callousness, but also in Bolivia, Columbia, Chile, Paraguay, Peru and Uruguay.⁴⁴

In Africa, among the 14 countries that have experienced a significant spike in coronavirus infections are Angola, Namibia, South Africa and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.⁴⁵

Meanwhile, July 11, 2021, data reveal a gargantuan Global North-South vaccination gap.⁴⁶ By the middle of the month, the U.S. had administered both doses to nearly half the country's population; in Britain, 52 percent of the population had received both jabs; in Canada, 36 percent were jabbed twice, and almost 70 percent had one shot; and in the European Union, 40 percent were "fully" vaccinated. (Bear in mind that the proportions would be far higher if only percentages were reported for adults and did not include youth jabs, and that vaccination rates are still increasing far faster in these places than in the Global South.)



Image credit: Swarnavo Chakrabarti / Unsplash

⁴² "Covid map: Coronavirus cases, deaths, vaccinations by country." BBC. July 8, 2021. [www.bbc.com. Web. https://www.bbc.com/news/world-51235105](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-51235105).

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ Taylor, Luke. "'We are being ignored': Brazil's researchers blame anti-science government for devastating Covid surge." *Nature News*. April 27, 2021. [www.nature.com. Web. https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-021-01031-w](https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-021-01031-w).

⁴⁵ Mwai, Peter. "Coronavirus in Africa: Concern grows over third wave of infections." BBC. July 8, 2021. [www.bbc.com. Web. https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-53181555](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-53181555).

⁴⁶ "More than 3.4 Billion Shots Given: Covid-19 Tracker." Bloomberg. July 11, 2021. [www.bloomberg.com. Web. https://www.bloomberg.com/graphics/covid-vaccine-tracker-global-distribution/](https://www.bloomberg.com/graphics/covid-vaccine-tracker-global-distribution/), accessed July 11, 2021.

Now, consider these examples of vaccination coverage in low-income countries, recorded just one month earlier:

- In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, Nigeria, South Sudan, Sudan, Vietnam and Zambia, it ranged from 0.1 to 0.9 percent of the population.⁴⁷
- In Angola, Ghana, Kenya, Pakistan, Senegal and South Africa, between 1 and 2.4 percent of the population had been vaccinated.⁴⁸
- Botswana and Zimbabwe have the highest coverage of vaccine doses in sub-Saharan Africa, 3 percent and 3.6 percent, respectively.⁴⁹
- In Asia (China and Singapore aside), Cambodia at 9.6 percent vaccine coverage was the leader, followed by India at 8.5 percent. Coverage in all other Asian countries was below 5.4 percent.⁵⁰

This North-South contrast matters because mutations first detected in the U.K.,⁵¹ Brazil,⁵² India⁵³ and South Africa,⁵⁴ which may prove to be up to 50 percent more transmissible,⁵⁵ are already circulating worldwide. Meanwhile, new ones — perhaps even more virulent — are likely to emerge in largely unvaccinated nations. This, in turn, will endanger anyone who's unvaccinated, proving particularly calamitous for the Global South.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ Kirk, Ashley, et al. "Which countries have reported the new UK Covid variant?" *The Guardian*. January 8, 2021. [www.theguardian.com](https://www.theguardian.com/world/ng-interactive/2021/jan/08/which-countries-have-reported-new-uk-covid-variant). Web. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/ng-interactive/2021/jan/08/which-countries-have-reported-new-uk-covid-variant>, accessed July 11, 2021.

⁵² Faria, Nuno R., et al. "Genomics and Epidemiology of the P.1 Sars-Cov-2 Lineage in Manaus, Brazil." *Science* 372, no. 6544 (2021): 815.

⁵³ Mendez, Rich. "Delta Covid variant first found in India spreads to 62 countries, hot spots form in Asia and Africa, WHO says." *CNBC*. June 3, 2021. www.cnbcm.com. Web. <https://www.cnbcm.com/2021/06/02/delta-variant-first-found-in-india-spreads-to-62-countries-hot-spots-form-in-asia-and-africa-who-says-.html>.

⁵⁴ Roberts, Michelle. "South Africa Coronavirus variant: What is the risk?" *BBC*. April 13, 2021. [www.bbc.com](https://www.bbc.com/news/health-55534727). Web. <https://www.bbc.com/news/health-55534727>.

⁵⁵ Balch, Bridget. "The Covid-19 Variants are Spreading Rapidly. Here's What Scientists Know about Them — and Why You Need a Better Mask." *AAMC*. January 26, 2021. www.aamc.org. Web. <https://www.aamc.org/news-insights/covid-19-variants-are-spreading-rapidly-here-s-what-scientists-know-about-them-and-why-you-need>.

Why the vaccination gap? Wealthy countries, none more than the United States, could afford to spend billions of dollars to buy vaccines. As well, the country is home to cutting-edge biotechnology companies like AstraZeneca, BioNTech, Johnson and Johnson, Moderna, and Pfizer. Those two advantages enabled the U.S. to preorder enormous quantities of vaccine, indeed almost all of what BioNTech and Moderna anticipated making in 2021, and even before their vaccines had completed clinical trials.⁵⁶ As a result, by late March, 86 percent⁵⁷ of all vaccinations had been administered across the 50 states, while at the same time a mere 0.1 percent was administered in poor regions.

This wasn't the result of some evil conspiracy. Governments in rich countries weren't sure which vaccine manufacturers would succeed, so they spread their bets. Nevertheless, their stockpiling gambit locked up most of the global supply.

Equity vs. power

Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, who leads WHO, was among those decrying the inequity of “vaccine nationalism.”⁵⁸ To counter it, he and others proposed that the deep-pocketed countries — those that had vacuumed up the supplies — vaccinate only their elderly, individuals with pre-existing medical conditions, and healthcare workers, and then donate their remaining doses so other countries could do the same.⁵⁹ As supplies increased, the rest of the world's population could be vaccinated, based on an assessment of the degree to which different categories of people were at risk. COVAX⁶⁰ — Covid-19 Vaccines Global Access — the U.N.

⁵⁶ Belluz, Julia. “Poorer countries might not get vaccinated until 2023.” Vox. April 28, 2021. [www.vox.com](https://www.vox.com/2021/4/28/22405279/covid-19-vaccine-india-covax). Web. <https://www.vox.com/2021/4/28/22405279/covid-19-vaccine-india-covax>.

⁵⁷ Collins, Keith, and Josh Holder. “See How Rich Countries Got to the Front of the Vaccine Line.” *The New York Times*. March 31, 2021. [www.nytimes.com](https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/03/31/world/global-vaccine-supply-inequity.html). Web. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/03/31/world/global-vaccine-supply-inequity.html>.

⁵⁸ Kretchmer, Harry. “Vaccine Nationalism – and How It Could Affect Us All.” World Economic Forum. January 6, 2021. [www.weforum.org](https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2021/01/what-is-vaccine-nationalism-coronavirus-its-affects-covid-19-pandemic/). Web. <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2021/01/what-is-vaccine-nationalism-coronavirus-its-affects-covid-19-pandemic/>, accessed July 11, 2021.

⁵⁹ Hassan, Jennifer, et al. “WHO chief urges wealthy countries to share doses before vaccinating kids.” *The Washington Post*. May 15, 2021. [www.thewashingtonpost.com](https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2021/05/14/coronavirus-covid-live-updates-us/). Web. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2021/05/14/coronavirus-covid-live-updates-us/>.

⁶⁰ “COVAX: Ensuring Global Equitable Access to Covid-19 Vaccines.” UNICEF. July 2, 2021. [www.unicef.org](https://www.unicef.org/supply/covax-ensuring-global-equitable-access-covid-19-vaccines). Web. <https://www.unicef.org/supply/covax-ensuring-global-equitable-access-covid-19-vaccines>.

program involving 190 countries led by WHO and funded by governments and private philanthropy, would then ensure that getting vaccinated didn't depend on whether or not a person lived in a wealthy country. It would also leverage its large membership to secure low prices from vaccine manufacturers.

That was the idea anyway. The reality, of course, has been altogether different. Though most wealthy countries, including the U.S. following President Joseph Biden's election, did join COVAX, they also decided to use their own massive buying power to cut deals directly with the pharmaceutical giants to vaccinate as many of their own as they could. And in February 2021, the U.S. government took the additional step of invoking the Defense Production Act to restrict exports of 37

raw materials critical for making vaccines.⁶¹

COVAX has received support, including \$4 billion⁶² pledged by President Biden for 2021 and 2022, but nowhere near what's needed to reach its goal of distributing two billion doses by the end of this year.⁶³ By May, in fact, it had distributed just 3.4 percent of that amount.⁶⁴

Biden recently announced that the U.S. would donate 500 million doses of vaccine this year and next,⁶⁵ chiefly to COVAX; and



⁶¹ Holton, Kate, and Elizabeth Piper. "‘We need more’: UN joins criticism of G7 vaccine pledge." Thomson Reuters. June 10, 2021. [www.reuters.com. Web. https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/g7-donate-1-billion-covid-19-vaccine-doses-poorer-countries-2021-06-10/.](https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/g7-donate-1-billion-covid-19-vaccine-doses-poorer-countries-2021-06-10/)

⁶² "Fact Sheet: President Biden to Take Action on Global Health through Support of COVAX and Calling for Health Security Financing." The White House. February 18, 2021. [www.whitehouse.gov. Web. https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/02/18/fact-sheet-president-biden-to-take-action-on-global-health-through-support-of-covax-and-calling-for-health-security-financing/.](https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/02/18/fact-sheet-president-biden-to-take-action-on-global-health-through-support-of-covax-and-calling-for-health-security-financing/)

⁶³ Berkley, Seth. "COVAX Explained." Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance. Undated. [www.gavi.org. Web. https://www.gavi.org/vaccineswork/covax-explained](https://www.gavi.org/vaccineswork/covax-explained), accessed July 11, 2021.

⁶⁴ Samuel, Sigal. "Why Covax, the fund to vaccinate the world, is struggling." Vox. May 20, 2021. [www.vox.com. Web. https://www.vox.com/future-perfect/22440986/covax-challenges-covid-19-vaccines-global-inequity.](https://www.vox.com/future-perfect/22440986/covax-challenges-covid-19-vaccines-global-inequity)

⁶⁵ Siddiqui, Sabrina, and Saeed Shah. "U.S. to Donate 500 Million Covid-19 Vaccine Doses to Lower-Income Countries." *The Wall Street Journal*. June 10, 2021. [www.wsj.com. Web. https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-to-donate-500-million-covid-19-vaccine-doses-to-lower-income-countries-11623263573.](https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-to-donate-500-million-covid-19-vaccine-doses-to-lower-income-countries-11623263573)

at their June summit, the G-7 governments announced plans to provide one billion doses altogether.⁶⁶ That's a large number and a welcome move, but still modest considering that 11 billion doses are needed to vaccinate 70 percent of the world.⁶⁷

COVAX's problems have been aggravated by the decision of India⁶⁸ to ban vaccine exports in the face of the surge of the virus in that country — India was expected to provide half of the two billion doses COVAX had ordered for this year.⁶⁹ In addition to developing and equitably delivering vaccines and medicines around the world, COVAX's program is focused on helping low-income countries train vaccinators, create distribution networks and launch public awareness campaigns, all of which will be many times more expensive to achieve than vaccine purchases, but no less critical.⁷⁰

Another proposal, initiated in late 2020 by India and South Africa, and backed by 100 countries mostly from the Global South, calls for the World Trade Organization (WTO) to suspend patents on vaccines so that pharmaceutical companies in the Global South can manufacture them without violating intellectual property laws; this would allow the launch of production nearer to the areas that need them the most.⁷¹

That idea hasn't taken wing, either.

⁶⁶ Holton, Kate, and Elizabeth Piper. "‘We need more’: UN joins criticism of G7 vaccine pledge." Thomson Reuters. June 10, 2021. [www.reuters.com](https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/g7-do-nate-1-billion-covid-19-vaccine-doses-poorer-countries-2021-06-10/). Web. <https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/g7-do-nate-1-billion-covid-19-vaccine-doses-poorer-countries-2021-06-10/>.

⁶⁷ Irwin, Aisling. "What It Will Take to Vaccinate the World against Covid-19." *Nature News*. March 25, 2021. [www.nature.com](https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-021-00727-3). Web. <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-021-00727-3>.

⁶⁸ Jayakumar, P. B. "India's Export Ban Hits COVAX Alliance; Covid-19 Vaccine Shortfall 190 Million Doses." *Business Today*. May 28, 2021. [www.businesstoday.in](https://www.businesstoday.in/latest/economy-politics/story/india-export-ban-hits-covax-alliance-covid-19-vaccine-shortfall-190-million-doses-297228-2021-05-28). Web. <https://www.businesstoday.in/latest/economy-politics/story/india-export-ban-hits-covax-alliance-covid-19-vaccine-shortfall-190-million-doses-297228-2021-05-28>, accessed July 11, 2021.

⁶⁹ Chowdhury, Debasish Roy. "Modi Never Bought Enough Vaccines for India. Now the Whole World Is Paying." *Time*. May 28, 2021. [www.time.com](https://time.com/6052370/modi-didnt-buy-enough-covid-19-vaccine/). Web. <https://time.com/6052370/modi-didnt-buy-enough-covid-19-vaccine/>.

⁷⁰ Wouters, Olivier J., et al. "Challenges in Ensuring Global Access to Covid-19 Vaccines: Production, Affordability, Allocation, and Deployment." *The Lancet* 397, no. 10278 (2021/03/13/ 2021): 1023-34.

⁷¹ "Urgently waive intellectual property rules for vaccine." Amnesty International. December 10, 2020. [www.amnesty.org](https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/12/urgently-waive-intellectual-property-rules-for-covid-19-vaccine/). Web. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/12/urgently-waive-intellectual-property-rules-for-covid-19-vaccine/>, accessed July 11, 2021.

The pharmaceutical companies, always zealous about the sanctity of patents, have trotted out familiar arguments (recall the HIV-AIDS crisis):⁷² Their counterparts in the Global South lack the expertise and technology to make complex vaccines quickly enough; efficacy and safety could prove substandard; lifting patent restrictions on this occasion could set a precedent and stifle innovation; and they had made huge investments with no guarantees of success.

Critics challenged these claims, but the bio-tech and pharmaceutical giants have more clout, and they simply don't want to share their knowledge.⁷³ None of them, for instance, has participated in the WHO's Covid-19 Technology Access Pool (C-TAP),⁷⁴ a platform created expressly to promote the voluntary international sharing of intellectual property, technology and know-how through non-restricted licensing.

On the (only faintly) brighter side, Moderna announced last October that it wouldn't enforce its Covid-19 vaccine patents during the pandemic — but didn't offer any technical assistance to pharmaceutical firms in the Global South.⁷⁵ AstraZeneca gave the Serum Institute of India a license to make its vaccine and also declared that it would forgo profits from vaccine sales until the pandemic ends. The catch: it reserved the right to determine that end date, which it may declare as early as this July.⁷⁶

⁷² Hoen, Ellen, et al. "Driving a Decade of Change: Hiv/Aids, Patents and Access to Medicines for All." *Journal of the International AIDS Society* 14, no. 1 (2011/03/27 2011): 15.

⁷³ Wallach, Lori, and Joseph E. Stiglitz. "Opinion | Preserving intellectual property barriers to Covid-19 vaccines Is morally wrong and foolish." *The Washington Post*. April 24, 2021. [www.washingtonpost.com. Web. https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2021/04/26/preserving-intellectual-property-barriers-covid-19-vaccines-is-morally-wrong-foolish/](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2021/04/26/preserving-intellectual-property-barriers-covid-19-vaccines-is-morally-wrong-foolish/).

⁷⁴ "How WHO C-TAP Works?" World Health Organization. October 27, 2020. [www.who.int. Web. https://www.who.int/initiatives/covid-19-technology-access-pool/what-is-c-tap](https://www.who.int/initiatives/covid-19-technology-access-pool/what-is-c-tap), accessed July 11, 2020.

⁷⁵ Loftus, Peter. "Moderna Vows to Not Enforce Covid-19 Vaccine Patents During Pandemic." *The Wall Street Journal*. October 8, 2020. [www.wsj.com. Web. https://www.wsj.com/articles/moderna-vows-to-not-enforce-covid-19-vaccine-patents-during-pandemic-11602154805](https://www.wsj.com/articles/moderna-vows-to-not-enforce-covid-19-vaccine-patents-during-pandemic-11602154805), accessed July 11, 2021.

⁷⁶ Mancini, Donato Paolo. "AstraZeneca Vaccine Document Shows Limit of No-Profit Pledge." *Financial Times*. October 7, 2020. [www.ft.com. Web. https://www.ft.com/content/c474f9e1-8807-4e57-9c79-6f4af145b686](https://www.ft.com/content/c474f9e1-8807-4e57-9c79-6f4af145b686), accessed July 11, 2021.

In May, President Biden surprised many people by supporting the waiving of patents on Covid-19 vaccines.⁷⁷ That was a big change given the degree to which the U.S. government has been a dogged defender of intellectual property rights. But his gesture, however commendable, may remain just that. Germany dissented immediately.⁷⁸ Others in the European Union seem open to discussion,⁷⁹ but that, at best, means protracted WTO negotiations about a welter of legal and technical details in the midst of a global emergency.

And the pharmaceutical companies will hang tough. Never mind that many received billions of dollars from governments in various forms,⁸⁰ including equity purchases, subsidies, large preordered vaccine contracts (\$18 billion from the Trump administration's Operation Warp Speed program alone), and research-and-development partnerships with government agencies.⁸¹ Contrary to its narrative, Big Pharma never placed huge, risky bets to create Covid-19 vaccines.



⁷⁷ Maxmen, Amy. "In shock move, US backs waiving patents on Covid vaccines." *Nature News*. May 6, 2021. Nature Publishing Group. [www.nature.com](https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-021-01224-3). Web. <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-021-01224-3>, accessed July 11, 2021.

⁷⁸ Borger, Julian, and Patrick Wintour. "US-Germany rift as Berlin opposes plan to itch Covid vaccine patents." *The Guardian*. May 6, 2021. www.theguardian.com. Web. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/may/06/us-ger-many-rift-covid-vaccine-patent-waivers>, accessed July 11, 2021.

⁷⁹ Stevis-gridneff, Matina. "Biden's Support for Vaccine Patent Waivers Faces Uphill Effort in Europe." *The New York Times*. May 6, 2021. www.nytimes.com. Web. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/06/world/europe/coronavirus-vaccine-patent-eu.html>, accessed July 11, 2021.

⁸⁰ Weiland, Noah, et al. "Pfizer Gets \$1.95 Billion to Produce Coronavirus Vaccine by Year's End." *The New York Times*. July 22, 2020. www.nytimes.com. Web. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/22/us/politics/pfizer-coronavirus-vaccine.html>, accessed July 11, 2021.

⁸¹ "Operation Warp Speed Contracts for Covid-19 Vaccines and Ancillary Vaccination Materials." Congressional Research Service. March 1, 2021. www.crsreports.congress.gov. Web. <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IN/IN11560>, accessed July 11, 2021.

How does this end?

Various mutations of the virus, several of them highly infectious,⁸² are now traveling the world, and new ones are expected to arise. This poses an obvious threat to the inhabitants of low-income countries where vaccination rates are already abysmally poor. Given the skewed distribution of vaccines, people in these countries may not be vaccinated, even partially, until 2022, or later. Covid-19 could therefore claim more millions of lives.

But the suffering won't be confined to the Global South. The more the virus replicates itself, the greater the probability of new, even more dangerous, mutations — ones that could attack the tens of millions of unvaccinated in the wealthy parts of the world, too. Between one-fifth and one-quarter of adults in the U.S.⁸³ and the European Union⁸⁴ say that they're unlikely to, or simply won't, get vaccinated. For various reasons, including worry about the safety of vaccines, anti-vax sentiments rooted in religious and political beliefs and the growing influence of ever wilder conspiracy theories, U.S. vaccination rates slowed starting in mid-April.⁸⁵

As a result, President Biden's goal of having 70 percent of adults receive at least one shot by July 4, 2021, was not realized. At least half of the adults in 25 states still remain completely unvaccinated.⁸⁶ And what if existing vaccines don't ensure

⁸² Bollinger, Robert, and Stuart Ray. "New Variants of Coronavirus: What You Should Know." Johns Hopkins Medicine. [www.hopkinsmedicine.org](https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/health/conditions-and-diseases/coronavirus/a-new-strain-of-coronavirus-what-you-should-know). Web. <https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/health/conditions-and-diseases/coronavirus/a-new-strain-of-coronavirus-what-you-should-know>, accessed July 11, 2021.

⁸³ Saul, Stephanie. "Covid-19: U.S. Vaccine Confidence Rises Though Skeptics Remain, Survey Says." *The New York Times*. May 27, 2021. [www.nytimes.com](https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/03/30/world/covid-vaccine-coronavirus-cases). Web. <https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/03/30/world/covid-vaccine-coronavirus-cases>, accessed July 11, 2021.

⁸⁴ "Over a quarter of adults in EU indicate they are unlikely to take Covid-19 vaccine." Mynewsdesk. May 13, 2021. [www.mynewsdesk.com](https://www.mynewsdesk.com/eurofound/news/over-a-quarter-of-adults-in-eu-indicate-they-are-unlikely-to-take-covid-19-vaccine-427227). Web. <https://www.mynewsdesk.com/eurofound/news/over-a-quarter-of-adults-in-eu-indicate-they-are-unlikely-to-take-covid-19-vaccine-427227>, accessed July 11, 2021.

⁸⁵ Bump, Philip. "Analysis | The vaccination slowdown has slowed down." *The Washington Post*. May 13, 2021. [www.washingtonpost.com](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/05/13/vaccination-slowdown-has-slowed-down/). Web. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/05/13/vaccination-slowdown-has-slowed-down/>, accessed July 11, 2021.

⁸⁶ Dan Keating et al. "At least 183.8 million people have received one or both doses of the vaccine in the U.S." *The Washington Post*, July 12, 2021. [www.washingtonpost.com](https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2020/health/covid-vaccine-states-distribution-doses/?tid=a_classic-iphone&no_nav=true). Web. https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2020/health/covid-vaccine-states-distribution-doses/?tid=a_classic-iphone&no_nav=true, accessed July 12, 2021.

protection against new mutations, something virologists consider a possibility?⁸⁷ Booster shots may provide a fix, but not an easy one given this country's size, the logistical complexities of mounting another vaccination campaign and the inevitable political squabbling it will produce.

Amid the unknowns, this much is clear: for all the talk about global governance and collective action against threats that don't respect borders, the response to this pandemic has been driven by vaccine nationalism. That's indefensible, both ethically and on the grounds of self-interest.

About the author

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Menon was awarded the Ellen Gregg Ingalls Award for Excellence in Classroom Teaching (at Vanderbilt University) and the Eleanor and Joseph F. Libsch Award

⁸⁷ Adam, David. "What scientists know about new, fast-spreading coronavirus variants." *Nature News*. May 24, 2021. Nature Publishing Group. [www.nature.com](https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-021-01390-4). Web. <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-021-01390-4>, accessed July 11, 2021.

for Distinguished Research and the Christian R. and Mary F. Lindback Award for Distinguished Teaching (at Lehigh University). He was selected as a Carnegie Scholar (2002–2003) and has also received fellowships and grants from the Woodrow Wilson Center, the Council on Foreign Relations, the Rockefeller Foundation, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, the Smith Richardson Foundation, and the U.S. Institute of Peace. Menon has written more than 50 opinion pieces and essays for the *Los Angeles Times*, *Newsweek*, *Financial Times*, *International Herald Tribune*, *Christian Science Monitor*, *Newsday*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Boston Globe*, and *Washingtonpost.com*. He has appeared as a commentator on NPR, ABC, CNN, BBC, Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, Australian Broadcasting Corporation, and World Focus (PBS). He is the author, most recently, of “The Conceit of Humanitarian Intervention.”