

March 9, 2022

President Joseph R. Biden
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, D.C. 20500

Dear President Biden,

More than two years into the Covid-19 pandemic and more than one year into your presidency, we are distressed to write that the United States is failing in its efforts to adequately address the worldwide pandemic. Responsibility for this failure is widely shared among nations, but the United States has a singular leadership role in global health; it has unique capacities and thus responsibilities; and a special duty to lead the world's response. So far, we have failed.

From the outset of the pandemic, there was widespread recognition that vaccines offered the best hope to end the worldwide health crisis as rapidly as possible and reduce the levels of global illness, death, disruption and impoverishment. There was recognition, too, that special efforts would be needed to deliver vaccines to low- and middle-income countries – financing, enhanced distribution capacity and, above all, expanded production of vaccines.

Vaccine development succeeded. Building on years of public investment and spurred by billions of dollars in Covid-related research and development and advance purchase commitments, effective vaccines made their way to market in record time.

But the effort to deliver vaccines to low- and middle-income countries has failed. The facts are stark: Even at this late date, only 19 percent of Africans have received a single shot. The vaccination rate among low-income countries is 14 percent – about one-sixth the rate in rich nations. And even those data disguise the extent to which people in poorer countries are receiving less efficacious vaccines.

The true toll of this failure will never be known, but at this point almost surely includes tens of millions of avoidable cases and hundreds of thousands of deaths from Covid. It also includes extreme disruption of poorer countries' economies and societies. The World Bank estimates roughly 100 million additional people living in extreme poverty (less than \$2/day) due to Covid. Some of this was unavoidable, but the Bank expects that low-income countries and African nations – exactly the nations with lowest vaccination rates – will have evidenced further increases in poverty in 2021.

There are two key explanations for this devastating failure: First, the United States and other rich countries not only, reasonably, prioritized domestic needs; they refused to pay appropriate

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attention to global solutions to the global pandemic, because of political concerns or otherwise. Second, the United States and other rich countries failed to expand vaccine supply sufficient to meet global need. Without adequate supply, efforts to bolster low-income country distribution and delivery systems consequently have lagged and been similarly under-resourced. Instead, governments permitted the multinational pharmaceutical companies to maintain a monopoly on the most advanced vaccines, declining to use existing authority to force those companies to share vaccine recipes and failing to invest in new vaccine production facilities.

There is no turning the clock back. We write now to plea with you to reverse course. We are highly supportive of vaccine donations from rich countries to low-income nations. But the donations have not been – and will not be – a substitute for sharing technology and increasing the overall supply of vaccines and implementing a plan to get shots into arms.

We write at this moment with great trepidation. With the Omicron wave fading in the United States, there is an understandable desire by everyone to “put the pandemic behind us.” On the one hand, this risks leaving poor countries out in the cold. Without concerted and determined efforts, vaccination rates will remain low in these nations. On the other hand, “put the pandemic behind us” risks repeating failures we cannot afford to replicate. If much of the world remains unvaccinated, the odds of new and dangerous Covid variants increase. Such variants will inevitably make their way to the United States, as Delta and Omicron have done in turn. We can certainly hope that this scenario won’t occur, but it is beyond reckless to rely only on hope – rather than a strategy of getting as much of the world vaccinated as possible.

Going forward, we urge your administration to:

- Use its authorities and request sufficient funding from Congress to share vaccine technology with other countries and support the scale up of vaccine manufacturing facilities in the United States and around the world. This remains an immediate need, but it is also crucial to create an infrastructure capable of dealing with evolutions of the virus, or other possible viruses.
- Augment your request for funding from Congress to fully resource support for vaccine distribution in low-income countries, including resources to support adequate “last mile” delivery of vaccines, effective public health messaging, and frontline healthcare workers.
- Act urgently to expand production and sharing of effective Covid therapeutics. Especially while vaccine access remains so inequitable, equitable access to effective therapeutics is crucial. The maker of the most important available therapeutic, Pfizer, plans to make far too little to meet global need.

President Biden, we write this letter reluctantly. We recognize the inherent difficulties in addressing a global pandemic with no recent historic parallel. We certainly appreciate this administration’s commitment to science and public health. But we have long urged effective action to address the worldwide pandemic, including in countless meetings with and

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communications to the administration. So far, our efforts have failed to spur appropriate action from your administration. We hope that this letter can help change that and look forward to working with your team in any way possible to meet the global challenge.

Sincerely,

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