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ACTU calls on the Australian Government to support developing countries' access to vital COVID-19 vaccines

More than 85 developing nations will not have widespread access to COVID-19 vaccines until 2023, because of intellectual property laws that prevent the production of cheaper versions of new medicines – a 'catastrophic moral failure' according to the World Health Organisation.

The ACTU stands with Australian civil society organisations in urging the Australian Government to support a proposal put forward by the governments of India and South Africa, that would waive some provisions of these intellectual property laws to allow the production of COVID-19 vaccines to be ramped up and made accessible and affordable to all.

The waiver will be next discussed at the WTO TRIPS Council formal meeting on 10th and 11th of March – coinciding with the one-year anniversary of the World Health Organisation declaring COVID-19 a pandemic.

The waiver would last for the duration of the pandemic and would cover medicines and vaccines, as well as technologies such as masks and ventilators.

Large pharmaceutical companies are set to profit hugely from the pandemic, with patents allowing them to have the monopoly on vaccine production for two decades.

Organisations like the Australian Council for International Development, the Public Health Association of Australia, Oxfam Australia and The Salvation Army Australia, among others, have also joined the ACTU's call.

The pandemic has highlighted the world's stark social and health inequities. It has also shown that no one is safe unless everyone is safe, and that to overcome the pandemic global solidarity and cooperation is required, not greed.

Quote attributable to Australian Council for International Development CEO Marc Purcell:

"As long as COVID 19 rages around the developing countries, Australia's economic and public health recovery will be undermined due to new variants of the virus hitting us and reducing the lifespan of vaccinations in Australia. It's in the national interest for Australia to back universal roll out of vaccines around the world and make generic vaccines available everywhere as fast as possible."

Quotes attributable to Public Health Association of Australia CEO Terry Slevin:

"Supporting the TRIPs waiver is essential to ending the global pandemic as quickly as possible. Wealthy developed countries have both a responsibility and a strong incentive to assist low-middle income countries with achieving vaccine access and success. Removing unnecessary trade barriers created by intellectual property rights over COVID-19 medical products is a key way this vital objective can be achieved. This is a fairer path which benefits the whole of humanity."

Quotes attributable to Oxfam Australia Chief Executive Lyn Morgain:

“The global fight against COVID-19 is not just a struggle to defeat a virus and keep people well. We must also fight to address the inequalities that make the virus so dangerous and will cause widespread poverty to follow.

“As rich countries like ours continue to roll out the COVID-19 vaccine, many developing nations have not yet been able to administer a single dose. Because of the limited supplies being made available to developing countries, they simply won't be able to vaccinate enough of their population to be effective.

“Australia must join with other nations to ensure that vaccine science and know-how is shared with qualified manufacturers around the world rather than remaining exclusively the property of a handful of pharmaceutical giants.”

Quotes attributable to Secretary for Mission, The Salvation Army Australia, Lyn Edge:

“Australia has done incredibly well to come through the pandemic because we have had the means to provide income support and top-notch health care services. It is now our moral responsibility as global citizens, committed to justice and human dignity, to support poorer nations to protect their own people.”

Quotes attributable to ACTU President Michele O'Neil:

“Big Pharma are profiting massively while frontline workers and high risk people in developing nations suffer because of outdated intellectual property laws that are no longer fit-for-purpose.

“What's needed in the face of this pandemic is global solidarity – Australia has a duty to support developing countries to protect their people from this virus and save as many lives as possible.

“The Morrison Government should value people's health and wellbeing over putting more money in the hands of Big Pharma.

It's vital that we focus global efforts on vaccinating everyone as soon as possible to stop further outbreaks – no-one is safe until we're all safe.

“This last year the pandemic has claimed the lives of millions, and has brought societies and economies to their knees. This initiative would bring essential healthcare to those who need it most and kick start the recovery process.

“100 countries around the world support this proposal to suspend intellectual property rights on COVID vaccines. It's time Australia does too.”

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