

INEQUITY IN ACCESS TO COVID 19 VACCINES IN POOR COUNTRIES: A CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF THE COVAX STRATEGY

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Abstract

Inequity in access to vaccines for epidemic diseases is a challenging issue in global health that has been further aggravated by the Covid-19 pandemic. There are enormous disparities in vaccine rates between low, middle, and high-income countries and in late September 2021, only fifteen out of 54 countries in Africa had reached WHO's goal to have fully vaccinated 10% of their populations. To increase equitable vaccine access for all, Vaccine Alliance (Gavi), Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations (CEPI), and World Health Organization (WHO) created the COVID-19 Vaccines Global Access (COVAX) platform focused on accelerating the development, manufacture, and distribution of Covid-19 vaccines. The COVAX platform have had troubles delivering on set goals and African leaders are now critical towards world leaders and COVAX for not materializing up to their promises. COVAX's failure to deliver actualizes the question of whether their strategy for vaccine equity is enough for addressing the issue. The paper employs Gramsci's concept of hegemony and Li's concept of rendering technical to critically examine dominant ideas in the COVAX platform's strategy and representation, and how this affects framings of solutions. The paper finds that COVAX's strategy for increasing vaccine equity for all fails to address power play and structures in manufacturing, distribution, and access to vaccines, and

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therefore fails to effectively address the issue of inequitable Covid-19 vaccine access.

Keywords: *Equity; Poor country access to Covid-19 vaccines; COVAX strategy*

Introduction

Health is a sector where significant global inequities persist. Despite recorded improvements and gains in health care delivery in the past decades, global inequities in access and affordability to medicine remains at high levels (Ottersen et. al. 2014). This is an issue that has been further aggravated by the Covid-19 pandemic as access to vaccines has been highly unequal. On October 13, more than 62% of people in high-income countries had been fully vaccinated compared to just 3.88% in low-income countries (UNDP, 2021). Wealthy countries are now planning for a third round of vaccine doses which is expected to further delay vaccinations of populations in low-and middle-income countries (Psaledakis, 2021).

In response to this, the Vaccine Alliance (Gavi), the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations (CEPI), and the World Health Organization (WHO) created a joint platform, COVID-19 Vaccines Global Access (COVAX), focused on accelerating the development, manufacture, and distribution of Covid-19 vaccines, and on guaranteeing a fair and equitable access for all (Gavi, 2021). The COVAX platform is the largest vaccine procurement and supply operation in history. When COVAX was created, its first goal was to distribute 2 billion doses of the Covid-19 vaccine by the end of 2021 (COVAX, 2020). The scheme hopes to distribute enough vaccines to protect at least 20% of the population in 92 low- or medium-income countries, to provide two billion doses of

vaccines worldwide in 2021, and 1.8 billion doses to 92 poorer countries by early 2022. But, in late September 2021, Covax had so far distributed only 303 million doses (BBC, 2021). The delay in COVAX's plan is mainly due to COVAX not acquiring enough doses. It has been criticised for being slow. Some initial targets were missed, partly because of the poor health infrastructure in many of the recipient countries, and partly because of vaccine hesitancy. Too many donations have come in small quantities, at the last minute and with little time left before they expire. This makes it very difficult to get them to where they are needed (BBC, 2021). Moreover, COVAX has had problems with distributing available vaccine doses, as many low-income countries lack proper infrastructure to distribute vaccine (Mueller and Robbins, 2021). In a recent statement, COVAX is pledging for more financing, dose donations, support, and a scale up of global manufacturing to enable equitable access to Covid-19 vaccines (UNICEF, 2021).

African leaders are now criticizing the COVAX platform and world leaders for not materializing up to their promises of providing vaccines (*African News*, 2021). Many countries in Africa, a region with a high share of low-income countries, suffer from extremely low vaccination rates (Owid, 2021). Only fifteen of the continent's 54 countries reached WHO's goal to have fully vaccinated 10% of the population by the end of September, while almost 90% of high-income countries reached this goal. Half of the 52 African countries that have received vaccines have only fully vaccinated 2% of their population. Most of African countries that have met the goal have received a sufficient supply of vaccine doses through more sources than COVAX donations (WHO Africa, 2021). During the Covid-19 Virtual Press conference organized by WHO in September 2021, Masiyiwa, the African Union's (AU) Covid-19 special envoy, pleaded for the AU to be allowed to buy vaccines rather than keep waiting for donations and pointed out that the COVAX initiative is only as strong as its donors. Masiyiwa further criticized export restrictions and called for a temporary waiver of

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intellectual property rights on the vaccines as Africa is setting up its own manufacturing capabilities (WHO, 2021).

Inequity in access to vaccines for epidemic diseases have long been a challenging issue in global health due to richer states' monopolization of vaccines (Fidler, 2010). Uneven power structures in knowledge, production and intellectual property rights for drugs further contribute to inequity in vaccine manufacturing and access globally (Ottersen et.al. 2014). The question remains, is COVAX's strategy enough to address global inequity in Covid-19 vaccine access?

This paper will critically examine COVAX's Structure and Principles. It will examine the gaps and possible solutions thereof, and the perspectives that need to be taken cognizance of, especially the critical points brought up by the African Union. The paper employs Gramsci concept of hegemony and Li concept of rendering technical to critically examine dominant ideas in COVAX platform's strategy, the roles of the different global political actors across all sectors that affect health and whose interests they represent, and how this affects solutions proposed.

Review of relevant literature

Theoretical Framework

To create an analytical framework for the critical analyzes of COVAX's Structure and Principles document, the theoretical section will explore critical theoretical approaches to global health equities. Critical theory has long played a role in global health debates and, according to Ingram (2018), studying global health from a critical perspective means taking social, economic, cultural, and political relationships into account. A suitable concept for analyzing uneven power structures globally is Gramsci's concept of hegemony.

Gramsci Hegemony

Many critical thinkers draw upon Gramsci's concept of hegemony to explain how neo-liberal values have dominated in the debate on global health policies in the past years (Ingram, 2018). Thinking critically also means taking power and politics into account. So, to approach global health critically is to appreciate that any analysis of global health takes place in the midst of power relations, power struggles, and political events (Ingram, 2018). Contemporary ideas of global development interventions, especially in the health sector descended from the colonial period, reshaped by cold war and decolonization. While the Western and Soviet blocs advanced distinct models of health and development based on their respective systems and ideologies, the non-aligned movement tried to develop alternative paths, ensuing struggles affected the workings of the World Health Organization (WHO) and other United Nations (UN) bodies and pervaded health policy debates (Ingram, 2018). By implication, global health inequity will be assessed based on the historical antecedents of the shocks of colonialism, two world wars, and the Cold War and even neo-colonialism.

Gramsci's term hegemony draws upon Marxist thoughts to describe how the ruling class dominates through the society's culture. The word, hegemony, was originated from the Greek word, *hēgemonia*, (ἡγεμονία), which means leadership and rule (Ross, 1994). In ancient Greece the word, hegemony, was used to denote the political and military supremacy of one city-state over another (Chernow & Vallasi, 1994). Hegemony, thus, is used in two contexts: firstly, to mean supremacy and secondly, to mean leadership with unanimous support incorporated (Bottomore, 1988).

Hegemony is a cultural process by which one class dominates the other. Thus, the dominators keep on practicing power and the ruled obey them. Simply, it means to drum something into the ear of the commoners and make them believe in it. It is a sort of conscientization to make the people believe in what is said and follow suit. According to Gramsci,

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hegemony is one kind of social authority. It is a sort of dominance on people without using power or threatening the use of it. It is acquired through social institutions. People accept that somehow by being forced or willingly. (Al-Amin & Sikdar, 2016)

Gramsci's context of hegemony and dominance took two different meanings. Any class imply force by any means to grab power and then by force remain the leading class; the power that is attained by force is defined as dominance by Gramsci. But, if this dominance is to be effectively attained, then there will have to be the struggle of establishing hegemony before ascending to dominance and even after that. All the norms and values, and even whole ways of thoughts and ideas of the dominating class should be deeply rooted among the dominated people. So, hegemony is an act of accepting the supremacy of one class upon another instead of using force and this supremacy is gained through the institutions located with the civil society's acceptance.

Dominance and hegemony are complementary to one another. The hegemony of the class whose dominance is being defeated and replaced with another does not collapse automatically. Rather, if it is not checked and controlled, it might weaken the new class's dominance (Al-Amin & Sikdar, 2016).

Hegemony is, then, the dominance of one group over another, often supported by legitimizing norms and ideas. It is the dominant position of a particular set of ideas and its efforts on hindering the dissemination or even the articulation of alternative ideas. The associated term hegemony is used to identify the actor, group, class, or state that exercises hegemonic power or that is responsible for the dissemination of hegemonic ideas (Rosamond, 2021). The hegemony has a self-interest in the preservation of the system and is, therefore, prepared to underwrite the system's security with its military might. At the same time, the hegemony

is responsible for the formulation of the rules that govern interaction within the international system.

These world orders function via the propagation of rules and norms, many of which are given legitimacy through international organizations and institutions and of which the most crucial tend to govern the conduct of monetary and trade relations. International institutions are, thus, seen as either conduits for the legitimization of particular regimes of capitalist accumulation or devices to absorb potentially counter-hegemonic ideas and social forces.

According to Gramsci (1971), hegemony, as a concept of power, emerges both through economic relationships and intellectual and moral authority of elite groups in society. Hegemonic values and morality are spread through civil society institutions such as schools. When hegemonic world views are socialized into every part of the society, they become objective truths that are hard to contest (Peet and Hartwick, 2015). The hegemonic order, therefore, constraints how problems can be discussed and what solutions are proposed (Kontinen & Millstein, 2017). Hegemony is upheld through the intellectual class that represents the interests of the ruling class (Gramsci, 1971). To contest the hegemonic order, the dominating ideology needs to be in crises. This can be achieved through an alternative class that challenges the dominant ideology. Moreover, there needs to be strong movements with contesting ideologies that have the power to break cultural and ideological bounds (Peet and Hartwick 2015).

The Concept of Rendering Technical

To further investigate who has control over the agenda and what consequences it has for development interventions, the paper will utilize Li (2007) concept rendering technical, which draws on Gramsci's work and Marxist theories. In "The will to improve", Li (2007) noted the tensions and contradictions inherent in the process of development intervention. It was strange that one group of people, with technical expertise, encapsulated in trustees (experts, planners, authorities) diagnose deficiencies in landscapes and populations, and devise technical schemes

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in the form of technical matrixes that identified the problem, translated the problem in the form of programme designs and models that were curated for the purpose of development intervention.

This became a development tool that was regimented and transferable to enjoy the features of portability to other climes in need of development assistance without reference to local level histories, geography, and socio-cultural differences. Li concept describes the process of how problems are “rendered technical”, as experts frame development issues and solutions in a way that lends itself to technical fixes without addressing root causes. Li emphasizes how issues that are rendered technical are simultaneously rendered non-political, as experts exclude political-economic relations or the historical context from their diagnoses and solutions, which constraint how problems are framed and what types of improvements are made. This process also confirms expertise as it implies boundaries between development experts and recipients of help.

COVAX principles and structures

This section will introduce the COVAX principles and structures document that will be critically examined through the theoretical framework. As the battle of ideas is central to Gramscian analyses, this chapter will also introduce a table were AU’s proposed solutions for vaccine equity, found in WHO’s COVID-19 Virtual Press conference transcript from September 14, 2021, are introduced as contrasting possible actions for vaccine equity.

COVAX’s structure and principles document starts by explaining what COVAX is and how it works. COVAX is part of the Access to Covid-19 Tools (ACT) Accelerator. The platforms aim to accelerate development and manufacturing of vaccines and guarantee equitable

access for all participating countries, working through vaccine portfolio diversification and pooling of financial and scientific resources to mitigate risks for participating countries.

The structures part of the document outlines how COVAX committees work and the functioning of the high-decision body, COVAX Coordination Meeting (CCM). There are many different committees contributing to COVAX's decision making. In these committees, actors that are represented include global health and development actors, researchers, state and regional representatives, industry representatives, and community-based organizations. In COVAX's high-level body, CCM, actors represented are mainly global health and development actors and industry representatives. Only one civil society organization (CSO), International Rescue Committee, is represented in CCM.

The ideology of the scheme outlines COVAX's governing principles, agreed upon by Gavi, CEPI and WHO, and its principles for managing conflicts of interests in CCM and committees. The governing principles state that COVAX's decision-making is done in an impartial, fair, and transparent manner and that decisions build upon a comprehensive overview. The governing parts are also to select appropriate members of critical advisory groups. The principles for conflict management mainly focus on member's obligation to ensure disclosed conflicting interests that could affect their judgement. Proposed conflicting interests are previous relationships with organizations, or financial and personal interests.

Table 1 shows the contrasting perspectives of different actors on how to increase equity in distribution of Covid-19 vaccines. It shows the divergent solutions proposed by the COVAX platform and the AU to further clarify their different views on framings of issues and solutions:

Table 1: Contrasting perspectives of different actors on how to increase equity in distribution of Covid-19 vaccines

| | | |
|--------|-------------------------|--------------------|
| Actors | COVAX (Gavi, CEPI, WHO) | African Union (AU) |
|--------|-------------------------|--------------------|

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| | | |
|--|---|---|
| <p>Framing of issues and Solutions</p> | <p>Increase manufacturing through common investments. Mitigate risks for actors through vaccine portfolio diversification and pooling of financial and scientific resources. Increase equitable access to vaccines through donations to low-income countries.</p> | <p>Increase AU's possibilities to buy vaccines through ending export restrictions (on e.g., vaccines, vaccine ingredients, and drug substances) Increase manufacturing of vaccines within the AU through a temporary waiver in intellectual property rights. Increase preparedness for distribution vaccine doses (both transport and pro-vaccine campaigns).</p> |
|--|---|---|

Sources: COVAX: The vaccine pillar of the access to Covid-19 tools (ACT) accelerator structure and principles (COVAX 2020) and WHO's COVID-19 Virtual Press conference transcript - 14 September 2021 (WHO, 2021).

Results and discussion

Analysis of COVAX platform strategy

The analysis will be divided into two sections. The first part will be concerned with contesting ideas on vaccine equity and will, through

Gramsci's concept of hegemony, critically examine how solutions are framed in the COVAX platform's strategy and what contesting ideas are left out.

The second section will focus on the representation in the COVAX platform and will employ Li's concept of rendering technical to examine how it affects development activities. The analysis will combine a theoretical discussion on findings.

COVAX's strategy: How solutions are framed and the contesting ideas

The COVAX platform's strategy for increasing equitable access to Covid-19 vaccines focuses on two aspects, manufacturing, and distribution of vaccines among members. COVAX's aim is to increase manufacturing of vaccines through common investments which will mitigate risks for member states as they will have access to a pool of different vaccines and will, therefore, not be dependent on one supplier. COVAX's solution for increasing equitable distribution of vaccines is through donating vaccines to low-income countries. The problem of equitable access to vaccines is here framed as a problem of manufacturing enough vaccines for all. They then fail to address other aspects that lead to inequity in access to vaccines, such as high-income countries monopolizing vaccines (Fidler, 2010) which makes it hard for low-income countries to acquire vaccines.

The issue is vaccine hoarding/nationalism where rich nations bought up more than their fair share of vaccine doses relative to their populations, securing enough doses to vaccinate their populations several times over. Meanwhile, low- and middle-income countries have struggled to secure enough doses to protect their most at-risk individuals, such as health care and other frontline workers, and older people (Liao, 2021). Another problem is high vaccine prices. Pharmaceutical companies would expect to recoup their investment in research and development, along with the costs of production and distribution before profit is introduced.

In addition, intellectual property right (IPR) is another challenge to vaccine access. Intellectual property like patents, copyrights, and designs

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can enhance or hinder the manufacturing of vaccines, masks, diagnostic tests, medicines, ventilators, and other equipment necessary to fight the pandemic.

The AU also brought forward pre-arrangements with vaccine manufacturers as one of the reasons AU has had problems acquiring vaccines (WHO, 2021). COVAX also fails to address how power over manufacturing affects countries' vaccine access.

In contrast, AU highlights increased manufacturing of vaccines as one of the most important steps in increasing vaccine access on the continent (WHO, 2021). As COVAX ignores this aspect of vaccine access, they further fail to address unequal power structures in knowledge production and intellectual property rights for drugs contributes to inequities in vaccine access (Ottersen et.al. 2014).

COVAX, thus, fails to address how economic-political relations affects vaccine manufacturing and distribution. AU highlights both export restrictions and intellectual property rights as barriers for manufacturing vaccines, which then affects the access to vaccines (WHO, 2021).

To understand why a limited set of ideas are represented in COVAX's agenda for vaccine equity and how this reinforces unequal power structures, the paper again employs Gramsci's concept of hegemony. According to Gramsci, power emerges both from economic relations and intellectual and moral authority. These uneven power relations are upheld through the hegemonic discourse that support interests of the ones in power and exclude contrasting views that would threaten their economic power. COVAX's strategy does not constitute a threat to how the vaccine industry is structured today, in contrast with AU's agenda that focuses on restructuring power over manufacturing through lifting export restrictions or removing intellectual property rights. These strategies would constitute a threat to powerful manufacturers; thus, these

ideas are excluded from COVAX's agenda, in accordance with the concept of hegemony.

Li (2007) further explains how development strategies that ignore political-economic realities tend to fail as they are not addressing root causes of issues. Li terms this process as rendering technical, which describes the process of how development issues are framed in certain ways by experts that lends themselves to technical fixes, ignoring the political-economic realities. Translated into this situation, it could be argued that COVAX's strategy is mainly technical as it is mainly focusing on increasing the volume of vaccines manufactured. The strategy is not concerned with how for instance power over manufacturing affects access to vaccines, and how political-economic structures, such as intellectual property rights and export restrictions, in the global system creates difficulties for countries with lower knowledge production to manufacture vaccines. The process of rendering technical also creates boundaries between experts and receivers of help, where expert knowledge is valued higher (Li 2007, p.7).

The problem of representation

Another factor that affects how efficient development strategies are is representation (Li 2007), which therefore, makes it interesting to consider representation within the COVAX platform and its' decision-making body (CCM). Looking at COVAX's structure, there are a wide range of actors represented in the platform's different committees. On the other hand, the main part of actors represented in COVAX's high-level body, CCM, are either global health development actors or industry representatives, except from one CSO (International Rescue Committee).

COVAX's principles are highly concerned with its collaborators and members' transparency to avoid conflicting interest playing a role in the platform's activities. However, a lack of equal representation could also constitute a problem for un-biased interventions as not all perspectives are accounted for.

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Li concept of rendering technical actualizes the importance of representation in development initiatives. According to Li (2007, p.8f), problems arise when development interventions are led by outsiders as they often fail to see the full picture of an issue. COVAX's lack of representation in the high-level body could then be an explanation for why COVAX have had troubles with reaching its' set goals as the lack of representation creates flaws in COVAX's strategy.

Conclusion

The analysis finds that the COVAX platform's strategy fails to address power structures and the political-economic realities that affect vaccine access and affordability, as the strategy mainly focuses on technical aspects of manufacturing as in increasing the volume of vaccines manufactured. It therefore fails to address how power over manufacturing affects access to vaccines, and how possibilities to manufacture vaccines are affected by political-economic structures in global relations. Is then COVAX's strategy enough to address global inequities in Covid-19 vaccine access? This paper argues that COVAX's strategy is not effective in addressing inequitable vaccine access as it ignores the political-economic reality of vaccine access. The paper further actualizes the question of representation in the COVAX platform and finds that the lack of actors represented in the high-level body, CCM, could constitute an issue for formulating effective strategies.

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