

Global Inequity Threatens Effective Control of COVID-19

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The most important health challenge facing the world today is to better manage the COVID-19 pandemic due to SARS Co-V2. The COVID-19 pandemic is responsible for more than 5 million deaths and 250 million confirmed cases globally (1) and has disrupted people's lives and livelihoods, crippled economies and increased inequity both between and within countries. Poverty, hunger and unemployment have increased, as have mental illness, physical and sexual abuse (2). The education of children and adults has been severely disrupted (3). The routine immunization coverage of children against communicable diseases has declined significantly threatening outbreaks of measles and other diseases in the near future.

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the inadequate preparation globally for emerging infections and the disparities in response due to grave inequities. Positive developments include the establishment of the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations (CEPI) in 2018, the Access to COVID-19 Tools Accelerator (ACT-A) and the COVID-19 Vaccines Global Access (COVAX) Facility in April 2020 as well as the rapid development of several efficacious COVID-19 vaccines (4). However, high-income countries have monopolized access to COVID-19 vaccines through advance purchases and other measures which has contributed to inequity of access to vaccines (5). High-income countries have vaccinated 63% of their population with at least one vaccine dose compared with low-income countries vaccinating only 3.9% of their people as of 13 October 2021 (6). Even more stark is the inequity of the financial burden on countries. Low-income countries need to spend on average 56.6% of their health budget to vaccinate 70% of their population compared with high-income countries spending 0.8% of their health budget (7).

Caribbean countries have been particularly hard hit by the COVID-19 pandemic experiencing negative growth. The tourism sector, which represents an average

of 27% of total GDP in Caribbean countries, came to a virtual standstill in April 2020 (8). Several countries face grave difficulty meeting their fiscal responsibilities and their health services have suffered severe stress when COVID-19 cases surged. Public health and social measures have been used to control COVID-19 including promoting wearing of masks in public, hand hygiene, physical distancing, restricting crowds, self-quarantine, testing, contact tracing, curfews and lockdowns of communities or entire countries. None of these measures were able to prevent periodic surges of COVID-19 cases while the measures to control the surges further restricted or disrupted economic activity.

There have been approximately 1.6 million confirmed cases and 20 000 deaths due to COVID-19 in Caribbean countries as of 18 October 2021 (1). The case fatality rate has varied from a low of 0.9% in Cuba and Barbados to 3.0% in Trinidad & Tobago and 3.3% in Grenada (Table 1). The proportion of the population fully vaccinated is highest in Cuba (60%) followed by the Dominican Republic (47%), Trinidad & Tobago (41%) and Barbados (40%) (9). A number of the UK overseas territories have higher vaccination coverage since they received vaccine from the UK soon after it became available. The countries with the lowest vaccination coverage are Jamaica (12%) and Haiti (0.2%) well short of the WHO target of 20% of their populations fully vaccinated by September 2021 (9). At this rate, neither country will achieve the WHO targets of 40% of their population vaccinated by December 2021 and 65% by March 2022. Some Caribbean countries used vaccines before they were Emergency Use Listed by the WHO and Cuba is using vaccines that they have developed.

Countries need to get as many people as possible vaccinated against COVID-19 as soon as possible. Haiti clearly has a major problem given the poor health infrastructure, the political instability and social unrest

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following the assassination of their president and a series of national disasters. Jamaica needs to take a hard look at their vaccination programme and take corrective action in order to improve their roll out. The programme would benefit from decentralising responsibility to the parishes and empowering the parish teams to plan and implement the vaccine roll out with multi-sectoral support at the local level. The physicians in the private sector need to be involved especially since they are trusted by their patients who are likely to follow their advice to take the vaccine if it is offered in their office. Careful attention must be given to addressing the concerns of people with respect to the vaccines some of which are generated from mis-information on social media.

While a number of countries have started providing booster doses of vaccine to their elderly and immunocompromised populations millions of persons in low- and middle-income countries (LMIC) are yet to receive a single vaccine dose. Most experts believe that it is premature to be introducing booster doses to fully vaccinated adults under the age of 60 years because the current vaccines remain effective against severe disease and so many persons remain unvaccinated due to limited vaccine supplies and inequity of access (10). A new

variant of concern could arise among the millions of unvaccinated persons and manifest immune escape from current vaccines. While a number of developed countries have pledged donations of vaccine to countries in need only a small proportion of the vaccine pledged has been shipped. The US has shipped 150 million doses (16% of their pledge) and China has shipped 50 million doses (46% of their pledge) (7). More vaccine must be urgently supplied to LMIC.

The COVID-19 pandemic poses a serious challenge to global and Caribbean leadership. Governments must invest more in building public health infrastructure and leadership, and in reducing inequities within and between countries. More must be done to promote health literacy and educate the people on the value of vaccination. Public health and social measures to control COVID-19 will still be needed with full restoration of economic activity even when high COVID vaccination coverage is achieved. Hopefully the next generation of COVID-19 vaccines will be able to enhance protection against both disease and infection. Meanwhile, the COVID-19 vaccine you take now may save you or a loved one from severe disease or death.

COVID-19 Cases and Deaths, Number and % Vaccinated in Caribbean Countries as of 18 October 2021

Country	COVID-19 cases	Deaths	Case fatality rate	Total doses	% with 1 or more doses	% Fully vaccinated
Cuba	935 000	8058	0.9%	24.2 m	86%	60%
Dominican Republic	371 447	4090	1.1%	12.5 m	59%	47%
Barbados	12 968	19	0.9%	258 231	50%	40%
Guyana	34 455	870	2.5%	596 526	47%	29%
Trinidad & Tobago	54 114	1600	3.0%	1.18 m	44%	41%
The Bahamas	21 580	590	2.7%	238 432	34%	28%
Grenada	5746	192	3.3%	62 095	32%	24%
St. Lucia	12 228	236	1.9%	86 700	27%	21%
Jamaica	87 586	2117	2.4%	860 482	19%	11%
Haiti	22 933	657	2.9%	96 073	0.6%	0.2%

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