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Headline: Vaccination gap jeopardizing climate action

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PARIS — Welcome to 2021, where global climate negotiations could become collateral damage of vaccine nationalism. In normal times, the bone of contention between rich and poor countries was who should bear the brunt of efforts to reduce carbon dioxide emissions. But the pandemic has already pushed back climate talks by a year, and now threatens to create an additional North-South rift.

In January, South African President Cyril Ramaphosa, in his last month as chair of the African Union, lambasted developed countries for ordering vaccines amounting to “up to four times what their population needs.” Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, director-general of the World Health Organization, warned of a possible “catastrophic moral failure” owing to unequal vaccine distribution. And both the Anglican archbishop of Cape Town, Thabo Makgoba, and UNAIDS executive director Winnie Byanyima have denounced the current global “vaccine apartheid.”

Failure to heal divisions over vaccine availability for developing countries could poison the well of global coordination and imperil the COP26 climate negotiations. The Global South accepted the principle of “common but differentiated responsibilities” in addressing climate change 30 years ago. But it might view the North’s vaccine selfishness as a sign of irresponsibility on the immediate vital issue of health—and refuse to engage in the necessary give-and-take in combating global warming.

The vaccine-induced erosion of collective responsibility, together with the economic impact of the pandemic, could result in countries announcing very disappointing “nationally determined contributions” to reduce CO2 emissions in the run-up to COP26. This risk is compounded by rich and poor countries’ differing priorities. Whereas the developed North puts tackling global warming first, health and development often take precedence in the Global South.

In this regard, US President Joe Biden has tasked Secretary of the Treasury Janet Yellen with promoting “debt relief initiatives that are aligned with and support the goals of the Paris Agreement”—in other words, green conditionality for debt reduction, restructuring, and cancellation. But developing economies that have suffered severely in the COVID-19 crisis and seen their development prospects stall might perceive such schemes as an extra burden imposed by the North.

What should be done? At their Feb. 19 virtual meeting, G7 leaders agreed to provide an additional \$4 billion to shore up the international Access to COVID-19 Tools Accelerator and the COVID-19 Vaccine Global Access (COVAX) facility, which aims to ensure rapid, fair, and equitable provision of vaccines to people everywhere.

This is a good start. But advanced economies should go further and offer the Global South a “solidarity package” encompassing vaccine distribution, debt relief, and climate goals, with the objective of securing fair and balanced efforts from all governments on all three fronts. Rich countries should recognize that, while they are negotiating over the transfer of hundreds of billions of dollars from North to South for climate action in the coming years, it would take only \$10-20 billion to fund COVAX fully.

Rich countries therefore have an opportunity to provide developing economies with extra resources for both short-term vaccine procurement and long-term recovery. Financing could come from new allocations of special drawing rights (the International Monetary Fund's reserve asset) or the quick use of special instruments like vaccine bonds issued by the International Finance Facility for Immunization. Above all, developed countries must ensure that COVID-19 vaccines are widely available—and continuously adapted to new coronavirus variants—with no delay for the Global South.

Exceptional dangers call for exceptional measures. With vaccine tensions and the ongoing economic crisis threatening to undermine international efforts to save the planet, a global North-South solidarity package represents the best way forward.

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Justin Vaïsse is founder and director-general of the Paris Peace Forum, the fourth edition of which will take place Nov. 11-13, 2021.

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