

A background image showing a close-up of COVID-19 vaccination records and syringes. The records are white with black text, and the syringes are blue and white. The text on the records includes "COVID-19 Vaccination Record" and "Please keep your record card, which includes medical information about the vaccines you have received." The syringes have "COVID-19 Vaccine" printed on them.

How the Commonwealth is championing teamwork and vaccine equity?

Opinion: Dr Pathik Hasan, Dhaka

by Dr Pathik Hasan, Dhaka

Commonwealth as a vanguard against COVID-19

COVID-19 has become one of the most perilous public health threats of all time, causing devastating human tragedies not seen since the Second World War. Simultaneously, the world is witnessing social and economic disasters that have been exacerbated by the pandemic. Therefore, there is no better time than now to come together in global cooperation to withstand these ominous repercussions. In this regard, the Commonwealth has successfully upheld itself as an ideal platform with its 'family spirit' approach to tackle these global challenges, with its wide-reaching networks of governmental, non-governmental, and civil society organizations around the globe.

Since its inception in 1931, the Commonwealth is celebrated as one of the few multilateral organizations, with diversified associated networks consisting of

a myriad of governmental, non-governmental, and civil society organizations, to foster collaborative actions based on shared history, collective goals, and common objectives. The commonwealth, comprising 54 member nations spread across Africa, Asia, the Americas, Europe, and the Pacific, encompassing many developed, developing, and lower-middle income countries (LMICs), is, therefore, an ideal multilateral organization to tackle the aftermath of the pandemic.

Championing Vaccine Equity

Whilst most COVID-19 vaccine doses administered so far have been delivered in developed countries, it was the Commonwealth, one of the championing voices, that raised concerns against ‘vaccine nationalism’ and called for an equitable distribution of vaccines for the developing and underdeveloped countries who have fallen ‘victims’ of ‘vaccine inequality.’ On 21 May 2021, Commonwealth health ministers espoused a joint statement for ensuring swift and equal access to COVID-19 vaccines across the globe. In its joint statement, the health ministers raised ‘deep concerns’ about the striking gaps in access and delivery of doses, especially in LMIC countries, and called for “fair and transparent” pricing for the vaccine. The statement reveals that “only 0.3 percent of the life-saving vaccine doses have been administered in 29 poor countries. About 84 percent of shots have been given in high and upper-middle-income countries.”

The Commonwealth Secretary-General Rt Hon Patricia Scotland QC postulates, “The rise of new variants shows that until everyone is safe no one is safe. No plan to tackle this virus will work until everyone agrees to work together. We must talk with each other to move away from some stockpiling vaccines, while many low-middle income countries still do not have access to the much-needed vaccines supplies for the vulnerable populations in their countries. So, co-operation to develop a global immunization plan to deliver equal access to vaccines must be a top priority.”

Contributing to Global Health Response

Globally, the Commonwealth is working together with its international partners to tackle the wraths of the pandemic, which includes supporting the World Health Organization, fulfilling the commitments contained in Resolution “COVID-19 Response” adopted at the 73rd World Health Assembly, facilitating research and development of vaccines, diagnostics and therapeutics, and innovative approaches such as the Access to COVID19 Tools (ACT) Accelerator, and perhaps, most importantly, supporting timely, equitable, and affordable access to health products and health technologies, including potential vaccines, treatments, diagnostics, and medical supplies for each nation, to states in most need of support. In addition, the Commonwealth with its diversified networks is on a mission to ensure that intellectual property (IP) rights do not present an obstacle to equitable access. Some of the Commonwealth member states, naming South Africa and India, are calling for a temporary waiver of existing patent rules concerning COVID-19 vaccines and medicines to put a sustainable and fast ending of the pandemic.

Furthermore, it re-affirmed its role as a ‘recognized inter-governmental champion of small States’ by coordinating purchases of enough vaccines for all Commonwealth States, thereby managing the risk of delays in the COVAX rollout. As a striking example of Commonwealth cooperation, the UK has pledged to donate at least 100 million surplus coronavirus vaccine doses within the next year. Bangladesh and India, two South Asian countries, have committed to helping their neighbours to access vaccines and medical assistance cooperation. This stands as another striking instance of solidarity in action.

To curb the global disparity in access to vaccines, the Commonwealth is funding the ACT Accelerator, advocating for greater sharing of technology, know-how, and intellectual property, and sharing vaccine samples with COVAX. In this regard, the Commonwealth Coronavirus Response Centre on

the Innovation Hub has demonstrated itself as a dynamic platform for concerned nations to share information to overcome the pandemic. The Commonwealth Pharmacists Association (CPA) and the Commonwealth Health Profession's Alliance (CHPA) are providing support to member nations to achieve more equitable and effective services by addressing the health needs of their population amidst the pandemic.

To conclude, it must be borne in mind that the only sustainable route to oust the pandemic lies in the doctrine of 'no one is safe until everyone is safe'. In this regard, the Commonwealth has undoubtedly emerged as one of the key forums to uphold this doctrine with its 'family spirit' approach to tackle the global pandemic by fostering global solidarity and upholding norms of international cooperation.

Author: Dr Pathik Hasan works with a Dhaka-based NGO



info@commonwealthchamber.com

commonwealthchamber.com

Commonwealth Chamber of Commerce | Copyright 2021 All rights reserved.

