

‘Profiteering’ of Covid pandemic must never be repeated, world figures warn

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Scathing open letter accuses big pharma of ‘exploiting’ publically funded vaccines and says humanity must come before commerce



Members of the People's Vaccine Campaign of South Africa protest against patents profiteering in Cape Town, South Africa, 11 March 2021. Photograph: Nic Bothma/EPA

The Nobel laureate Joseph Stiglitz, former first lady of South Africa and Mozambique Graça Machel and former UN secretary general Ban Ki-moon are among nearly 200 signatories to [a letter](#) calling on governments to “never again” allow “profiteering and nationalism” to come before the needs of humanity, in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic.

In a scathing open letter, published on 11 March, current and former presidents and ministers, Nobel laureates, faith leaders, heads of civil society organisations and health experts say Covid-19 vaccines and treatments had been [developed with public funding](#) but that pharmaceutical companies had exploited them to “[fuel extraordinary profits](#)”.

Instead of distributing vaccines, tests and treatments based on need, companies sold doses to the “richest countries with the deepest pockets”, the letter says.

This inequity led to 1.3m preventable deaths worldwide – one every 24 seconds – in the first year of the Covid vaccine rollout alone, according to [analysis](#) based on a [study published in the Lancet](#). “That those lives were not saved is a scar on the world’s conscience,” the letter continues.

Helen Clark, former prime minister of New Zealand and co-chair of the Independent Panel for Pandemic Preparedness and Response, established by the

World [Health](#) Organization (WHO), said even though publicly funded science had contributed to the success of Covid-19 vaccines, they weren't treated as global common goods. "Rather, nationalism and profiteering around vaccines resulted in a catastrophic moral and public health failure which denied equitable access to all," she said.

The letter, coordinated by the People's Vaccine Alliance, comes on the third anniversary of the declaration by the WHO that the [coronavirus outbreak had become a pandemic](#).



Moderna, Johnson & Johnson and Pfizer vials of Covid-19 vaccine. Photograph: Dado Ruvic/Reuters

Former and current leaders of 40 countries, including the former president of Malawi Joyce Banda, President José Manuel Ramos-Horta of Timor-Leste, and Fernando Henrique Cardoso, former president of Brazil, are among the signatories, along with the archbishop of Cape Town, Thabo Cecil Makgoba, and former heads of UN agencies.

Ramos-Horta said: "In the Covid-19 pandemic, those of us in low- and middle-income countries were pushed to the back of the line for vaccines and denied access to the benefits of new technologies. Three years on, we must say 'never again' to this injustice that has undermined the safety of people in every country."

Signatories write that today, many low-income countries cannot access affordable treatments or tests. They say it is reminiscent of the response to the HIV and Aids epidemic, where millions died as expensive treatments [were unaffordable](#) for people in much of the world.

The letter urges world leaders to support a pandemic accord that is currently under negotiation at the WHO and treat publicly funded medicines as "global common goods ... used to maximise the public benefit, not private profits".

It calls for the removal of intellectual property barriers that prevent the sharing of scientific knowledge and technology and for governments to support and invest in research and development. It also calls on governments to provide support for the [WHO's mRNA hub](#), which is sharing vaccine technology with producers in 15 low- and middle-income countries.

“With these actions, world leaders can begin to fix the structural problems in global health that have held back the response to Covid-19, HIV and Aids, and other diseases,” says the letter. “It is time to embed justice, equity and human rights in pandemic preparedness and response. Only then can we truly turn the page on this chapter of history and say, ‘Never again.’”

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