

Opinion **Covid-19 vaccines****Gordon Brown: G7 must bear the burden of vaccinating the world**

Time is short if the battle against Covid-19 is to be won and the economic gains realised

GORDON BROWN



© Jonathan McHugh 2021

Gordon Brown MAY 22 2021

Be the first to know about every new Coronavirus story

Get instant email alerts

The writer is a former UK prime minister

With the virulent B. 1.617.2 variant of Covid-19, which was first detected in India, spreading across Asia and Africa and now taking root in Britain, we are once again confronted with the unanswerable truth that no one is safe anywhere until everyone is safe everywhere.

Fortunately, the forthcoming G7 summit provides us with a unique opportunity to stop Covid-19 in its tracks.

The miracle that is science has given us multiple vaccines and nearly half of US and UK citizens have now received at least one Covid shot. But just [11 per cent of India](#) and little more than [1 per cent of sub-Saharan Africa](#) has been vaccinated.

This failure is man-made: it took nine months in 2020 to reach 1m deaths when we had no vaccine. But even after a vaccine had become available, we reached 2m deaths in four months and 3m in the next three.

By failing to ramp up vaccination more rapidly, we are dividing the world between the rich and vaccinated who will live, and the poor and unvaccinated who risk dying. The death tally, now approaching 3.5m, could top 4m during the next month.

It is now time for the politics to catch up with the science. The one sure way of maximising vaccine production and immunising the world is for the richest countries to underwrite the costs incurred by the poorest.

Providing funding now would help ramp up existing production facilities and so enable us to get on top of today's emergency. The [EU](#) has already recognised the importance of this, saying this week that it would back proposals to establish strategic manufacturing hubs in African countries.

Guaranteed long term financing would create a virtuous circle, encouraging the transfer of technology (one hopes with a temporary patent waiver), new licensing agreements, the build-up of manufacturing capacity in Africa and elsewhere and a secure supply chain of anti-Covid vaccines.

This would not just be an act of charity but one of self-protection. No country can finally be Covid-free until every country is. The longer the poorer countries go unshielded, the more the disease will continue to spread, mutate and threaten not just them but rich countries as well, including the already vaccinated. [John F Kennedy](#)'s words of 60 years ago ring truer than ever: "If a free society cannot help the many who are poor, it cannot save the few who are rich."

Mass vaccination is not just an epidemiological and ethical imperative. It is also an economic imperative for all countries and the best insurance policy in the world. If the cost of vaccines is in billions, the overall benefits of additional economic output made possible as trade resumes in a Covid-free world are in the trillions.

Two reports published on Friday make this business case. According to the IMF, the cumulative gain will be \$9tn by 2025, \$3.6tn accruing to the advanced economies which will recoup \$1tn in tax revenues, making it "possibly the highest return in public investment ever". And a country-by-country analysis published by Save the Children shows that American and European funding of vaccines will each be repaid 35 times over in increased trade and output.

So who pays? This medical Manhattan project will require 10bn new vaccines each year. For a low-income country, the cost is of course prohibitive. A two-shot \$10 vaccine can account for an entire week's income for a family of five or six. But when shared by all of us, the bill is affordable.

[ACT-A](#), a unique partnership forged to enhance international co-operation, provides a vehicle for equitable provision of tests, treatments and vaccines to cover the world's 92 poorest countries. But to bridge its huge financing gap this year and next, around \$66bn more will have to be raised from the 90 or so donor countries who have the financial firepower to contribute. But, as yet, only \$14bn has been promised.

Time is short if the battle between virus and vaccine is to be won and the economic gains realised. June's G7 meeting is the right time with the right people — the richest countries around a table ready to make a historic decision to agree a burden-sharing plan.

Under a [formula](#) developed by the Norwegian and South African governments, the G7 attendees would cover as much as two-thirds of the ACT-A bill. After taking into account each country's income, wealth and the differential benefits each gains from the reopening of the world economy, the US would contribute 28 per cent; the EU 22 per cent; the UK 6 per cent and Japan 9 per cent. Other members of the G20 and the oil-producing states would cover the rest.

Of course, investment in vaccines diagnostics and therapeutics cannot be viewed in isolation. The multilateral development banks must relieve the intolerable burden placed on health systems that are under-resourced and understaffed. If necessary, they should request a recapitalisation. And, as two former leaders, Liberia's Ellen Johnson Sirleaf and New Zealand's Helen Clark, have [proposed](#), we need infrastructure investment now if we are to prevent the pandemics of the future. Some of the [\\$650bn](#) of new international money — so-called special drawing rights — to be issued later this year should be devoted to global public health.

Martin Luther King [said](#) that in a crisis there is such a thing as being too late. Last year we lost thousands of lives because the world failed to co-operate. Sadly, the death toll this year is set to be even higher than last. The G7 can be our starting point on the road back to sanity — and safety.

[Copyright](#) The Financial Times Limited 2021. All rights reserved.