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Is vaccine hoarding a kind of genocide?

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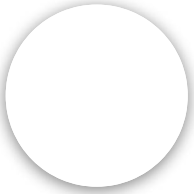


'Most rich nations are guilty of this unscrupulous accumulation of Covid-19 vaccines'

Opinion: the preventable death of many people in poorer countries is a foreseeable side-effect of hoarding by the few in rich nations

We all know that the pandemic is a global phenomenon. Another global phenomenon, perhaps less well-known, is the hoarding of vaccines by the richest nations. The UK is on course to stockpile up to 210m spare coronavirus vaccines by the end of the year. These are 'spare' in the sense that they are not needed. Since global production of vaccine has a limited capacity, it stands to reason that an nation is not going to have enough vaccines if another nation claims more vaccines than it needs. Of course the UK is not the only nation hoarding vaccines; most rich nations are guilty of this unscrupulous accumulation.

As if this was not bad enough, what is even worse is that many of those spare vaccines are going wasted. Millions of them. In the United States, over 15 million doses of Covid-19 vaccines have been thrown away since March 1st last. Before we get on the moral high horse, let's not forget that Ireland does not fare better on this issue. In August, *The Irish Times* reported that a group of 16 pharmacists had written to Taoiseach Micheál Martin and Minister for Health Stephen Donnelly, saying that thousands of doses of the Janssen vaccine had already gone or were about to go out of date.



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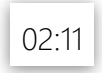
From RTÉ Radio 1's Today With Claire Byrne, former British prime minister and WHO Ambassador for Global Health Financing Gordon Brown on vaccine equality

This recent development in the fight against Covid-19 raises the question whether hoarding vaccines constitutes an act of violence, and if so, whether it can perhaps even be considered an act of genocide. There are two ways to perform an act of violence: via a direct action, or via an omission. Everyone agrees that a slap in the face is an act of violence, but so is neglect, since withholding something needed can be as harmful as a direct act of aggression. Oxford philosopher Philippa Foot once suggested that there is blame

in "allowing people in Third World countries to starve to death as would be for killing them by sending poisoned food".

While we are not sending poisoned food to Africa, we are allowing people in poorer nations to die by hoarding vaccines. As of last month, fewer than 4% of people in Africa have been fully immunised. South Africa's president Cyril Ramaphosa recently condemned the full extent of global vaccines-injustice: "it is an indictment on humanity that more than 82% of the world's vaccine doses have been acquired by wealthy countries, while less than 1% has gone to low-income countries".

It is tempting for people in Europe and the US to argue that rich nations are not doing anything wrong, that Covid-19 has created a Hobbesian state of nature and nations must look after their own. Furthermore, rich nations are merely acquiring vaccines in an open market, and to question their legitimate claim on these vaccines is paramount to questioning the legitimacy of private property.

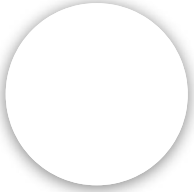


From RTÉ One's Nine News, the World Health Organisation has slammed wealthy nations' rush towards Covid-19 vaccine boosters

This attempt at disclaiming responsibility does not stand up to scrutiny. The best philosophical justification of private property, in the state of nature, is found in a treatise by 17th century philosopher John Locke, the paladin of liberalism and emergent early modern capitalism.

Locke formulated what is still the most influential justification of private property, but with a proviso, which includes the requirement that in accumulating private property nothing should go wasted: "as much as any one can make use of to any advantage of life *before it spoils*". Of course, Locke justified his proviso on the basis that "nothing was made by God for man to spoil or destroy" and someone could argue that the manufacturing of vaccines is not an act of God, but that would be disingenuous nit-picking.

Given that hoarding is wasteful, and an act of violence, could this unnecessary practice of stockpiling of vaccines also amount to an act of genocide? According to international law, genocide is defined as an act of violence "committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group", including killing or causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of a group.



From RTÉ Radio 1's Drivetime, David Nabarro, Special Envoy on Covid for the WHO, tells us why the WHO wants us to pause plans for Covid-19 booster shots.

Since vaccine hoarding is not done with the *intention* of killing off people in poorer nations, one could be tempted to wave aside claims of genocide as unsubstantiated absurdity. But the uncomfortable truth is that the rich nations hoarding vaccines tend to be 'white', unlike many of the poorer nations desperate for vaccines. The racial divide between those who have vaccines and those who don't cannot be denied. Vaccine inequality ought to be examined through the lenses of postcolonial theory.

While there may not be a deliberate intention to kill, it was predictable that many people in poorer nations would die as a result of the rich nation's needless propensity to accumulate. The preventable death of many is a foreseeable side-effect of hoarding by the few. One life in Europe or the US seems to count more than multiple lives in Africa, Asia and South America.

Legally speaking, vaccine-hoarding may not add up to genocide, but it comes close to it morally speaking. The fact that one is even considering the question of genocide suggests that there is a serious problem. Hoarding vaccines is an act of possessive nationalism, and irresponsible deprivation. Vaccine distribution is a zero-sum game: when nations with an already high percentage of vaccinations among its citizens secure even more vaccines (more than they need), they are withholding these vaccines from countries that desperately need them. Once again, this pandemic has exposed the grotesque extent of structural injustice in every aspect of modern capitalism.

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