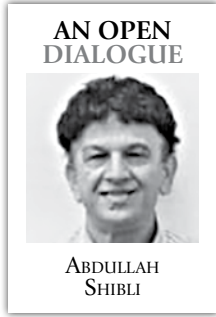


Cheap and fast vaccination is an urgent need for poorer countries

Can alternative financing models beat "vaccine nationalism"?



AN OPEN DIALOGUE
ABDULLAH SHIBLI

THERE is a global race going on now for the rapid development of a Covid-19 vaccine. As of July 27, pharmaceutical companies worldwide were working on 164 candidates, including 25 that are being tested in people, according to the World Health Organization (WHO). Unfortunately, it is not certain that developing countries like Bangladesh will necessarily benefit from the vaccine. "Vaccine nationalism" is threatening to make it difficult for third-world countries to secure inexpensive and adequate supplies of reliable vaccines. Vaccine nationalism occurs when a country manages to secure doses of vaccine for its own citizens or residents before they are made available in other countries. This is done through pre-purchase agreements between a government and a vaccine manufacturer. The bottom line is, vaccine nationalism will affect the distribution of Covid-19 vaccines, which is likely to be based on high-income countries' purchasing power rather than the risk of transmission.

Not long ago, in a paper in the Harvard Business Review (HBR), three scientists expressed their concern over rich countries bankrolling vaccine development and leaving only the crumbs for developing countries. They strongly rejected such nationalistic responses, and voiced the need for a centralised, trusted governance system to ensure appropriate flow of capital, information and supplies. They wrote: "Experts in epidemiology, virology, and the social sciences—not politicians—should take the lead in devising and implementing science-based strategies to reduce the risks that Covid-19 poses to the most vulnerable across the globe and to reduce transmission of this novel virus for all of us."

It is expected that a Covid-19 breakthrough could beget off-the-charts expensive treatments. Some of the existing drugs that scientists are testing as Covid-19 treatments have a special status for rare disease

treatments, and the price tags to match—prompting early warnings from academics and drug pricing reform advocates that if one is effective, access could be a critical issue.

On July 31, Dr Anthony Fauci, head of the US National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, declared that he was optimistic that a vaccine to vanquish Covid-19 would be widely available soon. Later, while testifying before a panel of the US House of Representatives, he backpedalled and toned down his initial enthusiasm, saying, "Once a coronavirus vaccine is approved as safe and effective, Americans should have widespread access within a reasonable time."

Fauci expressed "cautious" optimism that a vaccine would be available by 2021. But there was a catch. There will be a priority list for who gets early vaccinations. "I don't think we will have everybody getting it immediately," he said.

Things have moved fast since then. On August 11, the US government signed a USD 1.525 billion deal with Moderna, an American biotechnology company, which will manufacture and deliver 100 million doses of its experimental vaccine. The US has also made similar deals with two other drug makers.

The US government's Operation Warp Speed is bankrolling several other efforts and it also has the option for an additional 400 million doses of Moderna's vaccines. The US government's largesse is viewed with suspicion, however. It is being seen as funding its efforts to scoop up all available vaccines in the US and Europe. The question is, could the US government be trying to leverage its deep pockets to garner influence over foreign countries?

While it is understandable if the US government is asking for a first dip in the pie, with a total commitment of USD 2.48 billion for Moderna's vaccine candidate, there is global resentment that it is squeezing out other buyers. But US experts in unison said, "We want a new vaccine as fast as possible, where each month matters," and vaccines often take 10 years to bring to market. Consequently, the US government stepped in to get Moderna and others to fast-track the vaccine development. Moderna set a record

by producing its vaccine in 42 days after receiving the genetic sequence of the virus that causes Covid-19.

As expected, for every major Covid-19 related development in the clinical sphere, there is good news soon followed by bad news. Each prospective vaccine goes through three phases of study in humans. Phase 3 trials can determine that the vaccine works better than a placebo and doesn't cause harm to the people who get it. To beat the US and the west, Russia cut short the third phase and

The Russian vaccine is cheaper, but Russia is taking a dangerous step by jumping ahead of the phase 3 trials. "I think it's really scary. It's really risky," said Daniel Salmon, the director of the Institute for Vaccine Safety at Johns Hopkins University. Financing the quest for vaccines is proving to be a big hurdle, and Prof Bernard Avishai of Dartmouth poses a challenging question, "Is financial engineering the key to ending pandemics?"

In the past, most high-income countries

turned to pharmaceutical companies within their own borders for production. High-income countries directly negotiated large advance orders for the vaccine, crowding out poor countries. Although several of those rich countries, including the United States, agreed to make vaccine donations to low- and middle-income countries, they only carried out these donations after ensuring they could cover their own populations first. But according to WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, "Vaccines only realise their true power when they are deployed to protect the poorest and most vulnerable."

In their HBR paper, Prof Rebecca Weintraub of Harvard Medical School and

her co-authors discussed different financing mechanism to beat vaccine nationalism. In the advanced market commitment (AMC) model, "donors make a commitment to subsidise the purchase of a yet-to-be-developed vaccine for developing countries, providing vaccine manufacturers with an incentive to invest in what's needed to bring a vaccine to the developing world market."

Along with vaccines, cheap and fast testing for the virus is also essential. My economics professor at Boston University, Dr Larry Kotlikoff, along with Harvard's Michael Mina, have pushed for a USD 1 daily test which could allow at-home testing. Fortunately, some Good Samaritans are coming forward at this time of crisis to help testing, treatment, and vaccination of the world's poor. Bill Gates announced on August 7 that his foundation would spend USD 150 million to distribute vaccines, if they are found, to some of the world's poorest people. The Gates Foundation is funding the Serum Institute of India, the largest manufacturer of vaccines globally by volume, to produce 100 million doses that would cost at most just USD 3 each.

Another initiative, COVAX Facility aims to deliver two billion doses of safe, effective vaccines by the end of 2021. These vaccines will be delivered equally to all participating countries, proportional to their populations, initially prioritising healthcare workers, then expanding to cover 20 percent of the population of participating countries. Further doses will then be made available based on country need, vulnerability and Covid-19 threat in order to address concerns that the poor might get free or cheap vaccines during a pandemic but pay dearly for annual Covid-19 shots thereafter.

It has to be understood that when all is said and done, the fight against Covid-19 pandemic is not a zero-sum game. There is so much interdependence among various nations that we all gain from global development and fair distribution of rapid and inexpensive tests, treatments, and vaccines for Covid-19.

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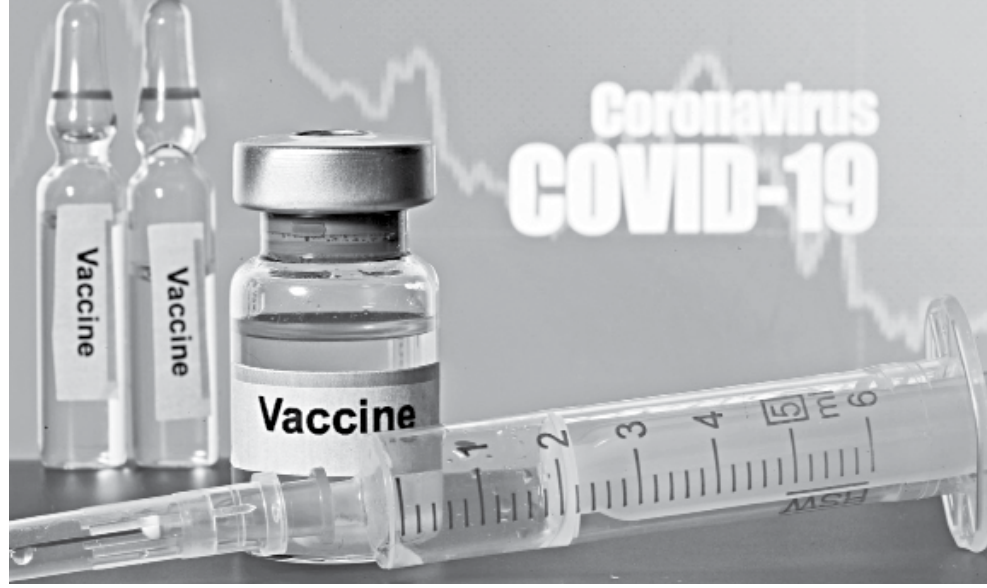


PHOTO: REUTERS

President Putin announced, on August 10, that Sputnik-V is going into mass production. Meanwhile, in the US and the UK, phase 3 clinical trials are underway for Moderna's and Oxford/AstraZeneca's new coronavirus vaccines.

The price of Moderna's vaccine is USD 25 for the US but twice as much for non-US customers. One analyst estimated that each person would need five doses of a Covid-19 vaccine to be fully protected. "The nightmare situation really is breakthrough, extremely effective Covid-19 treatment that's priced so high that hospitals and patients can't access it," said Kao-Ping Chua, a paediatrics researcher at the University of Michigan.

Covid-19: A win for disaster capitalism and loss for the climate

ANUPOMA JOYEETA JOYEE

IF six months ago someone had proposed shutting down the whole world to resolve a crisis, they would have been laughed off. In times of shock, impossible ideas suddenly seem possible and, more often than not, it's the corporations that reap the benefits of that possibility.

This theory of disaster capitalism was discussed by Canadian author and social activist Naomi Klein in her book "The Shock Doctrine". The regulations and policies which capitalist corporations usually have a harder time getting approved, due to ardent opposition, are suddenly passed in the sweeping shockwave of a disaster, or pre-existing hurdles are suddenly removed.

Those ideas for regulatory changes do not unexpectedly emerge once the country goes into crisis mode, nor are they proposed to alleviate suffering during the crisis, Klein argues. They usually have those ideas already formulated. And exploiting the vulnerability of governments in the wake of a disaster, corporations can then easily have approval for their demands. In such a time, governments are less likely to think through the implications of these policies.

The citizens' collective disorientation during a crisis, when merely surviving is a battle, produces just the right conditions for disaster capitalists to thrive. We are too baffled to pay attention to the policies getting passed and definitely too fatigued to oppose them. When death count leads the newspapers, policy changes feel like non-issues and logically get pushed towards the back pages.

This brings me to the inevitably upcoming (and already existing) crisis of climate change. For example, in Canada, the Alberta



File photo of a worker wearing a face mask in front of trucks parked at an Amazon facility at Bethpage on Long Island, New York.

PHOTO: REUTERS/KRYSTAL HU

government abused the distraction offered by the pandemic to massively deregulate oil extraction, push through controversial oil pipelines and pull down legislative, regulatory and financial impediments to oil sands development.

Now let us put this reality against the ecofascist propaganda that surfaced soon after the lockdown began. "We're the virus, and nature is healing," read every other post on social media. Is it really, though?

The exploitative oil and gas corporations are lobbying hard to receive tax cuts so that they can return with added vigour and catch up with the profits lost during the pandemic. Saying "humans are the virus"

is problematic on multiple levels. First, this far-right agenda tries to justify the human cost of coronavirus, that a specific chunk of the population is more valuable than the rest. The RMG workers in Bangladesh were made to walk hundreds of miles into the capital for a measly sum in the most crucial moment of the nationwide lockdown. This was soon followed by a response from the BGMEA president that these poor, vulnerable workers are strong enough to keep producing cheap clothes to keep the economy running. However, in reality, this group of people are unlikely to get tested properly, and likely to get added to the undocumented death count. Second, by claiming that "people are

the virus" instead of pointing fingers at a system that nurtures greed and profit and invalidates human life, we justify the deaths of poor, marginalised and ethnic minorities as well as the elderly, because they remain the most vulnerable, and are usually the first ones to go. Third, saying we are the virus enables the rich and powerful to completely detach themselves from their liability and avoid taking any real, tangible steps to undo and reduce the environmental damage they are inflicting.

In a way, we are lucky that coronavirus comes with some techniques to reduce the damage; we can practise social distancing, work from home and practise good hygiene to flatten the curve. Despite failing to build up the healthcare system, we could minimise some damage by taking these drastic steps when the disaster kicked down our door. Unfortunately, the same cannot be done about the climate crisis. It is ultimately a slow-burning poison, which simply cannot be put off for the very last moment. Once again, the poor and the marginalised will suffer the first blow and it will widen the socio-economic divide where the rich will keep getting richer, quite like Jeff Bezos. While the pandemic has carried him closer towards a trillionaire status, the people who work for his multi-billion corporation Amazon have to go on strike just for basic protective equipment.

The tendency of denying a crisis follows the same script. First, established science gets questioned, followed by the assurance that everything is under control. We've seen this tactic being used for years to neutralise the very warranted panic around the changing climate, and we saw it recently for coronavirus. For decades, environmentalists' concerns have been put

off and meticulously-drawn-out policies were manufactured so that all the powerful countries of the world had ample time, opportunities and excuses to shelve the reduction of carbon emissions. The people were told that it is not so easy to execute.

And yet, this pandemic has proven that radical change is possible literally overnight, once the world goes into an unavoidable crisis mode. However, in the context of climate change, if we wait till the irreversible crisis mode is activated, the human cost and economic loss will be unimaginably high. When the policymakers tell us it is impossible, let us not forget that it is an eyeshaw because we have already done what was previously unthinkable. Let us not forget how helpless this pandemic makes us feel, what it feels like to not be able to find a bed at the hospital for our loved ones, to not be able to help everyone we want. Let us not forget the plight of the RMG workers who were unfairly brought to the city amid the pandemic, or the horrific situation millions are facing while having to make a choice between life and livelihood.

We all want to return to our normal lives, and that is the root of the problem. That life should not have been normalised to begin with. In the wake of this obscene disaster capitalism, we do not have the luxury to be fatigued. The progressives must also take advantage of this shockwave to execute changes that have been shelved for ages under the excuse of being impossible. Expecting to solve the climate crisis by piggybacking on the pandemic is futile. Nature is not healing itself; in fact, it is about to get much worse, unless we act now.

Anupoma Joyeeta Joyee is a Barrister-at-Law.

QUOTABLE Quote

BKS Iyengar (1918-2014)
 Indian teacher and populariser of Yoga.

The hardness of a diamond is part of its usefulness, but its true value is in the light that shines through it.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Choir voice
- 5 Scrooge cries
- 9 Spotless
- 10 Skilled
- 12 Toward the stern
- 13 Sun-powered
- 14 Bureaucratic hassle
- 16 Hot blood
- 17 Fade out
- 18 House of Lancaster symbol
- 20 Try hard
- 22 Not new
- 23 Bank offerings
- 25 On the house
- 28 Irritate
- 32 Sign of embarrassment

DOWN

- 1 Even though
- 2 One in front
- 3 Wilson's predecessor
- 4 Quebec neighbor
- 5 Founded
- 6 Bustle
- 7 Greek sun god
- 8 Thinly scattered
- 9 Deck makeup
- 11 Cornered
- 15 Act of remorse
- 19 Reddish brown
- 21 Hebrew letter
- 24 Pine droppings
- 25 Stews
- 26 Depended
- 27 Like some mushrooms
- 29 Hot dish support
- 30 Cruise ships
- 31 Coarse stuff
- 33 Pretentious
- 37 Made rugs
- 39 Poet's contraction

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YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

P	A	W	S	C	A	P	S
I	D	E	A	L	A	L	E
C	O	S	M	O	D	O	N
A	R	T	L	E	G	E	N
S	E	V	I	L	L	E	S
S	I	D	E	S	L	Y	R
S	R	E	D	S	A	L	E
B	O	G	S	W	A	I	V
E	L	I	M	A	N	C	A
F	I	N	L	A	N	D	N
I	V	I	E	S	A	G	I
T	I	A	N	T	L	E	A
A	N	T	S	L	E	N	O

BEETLE BAILEY BY MORT WALKER

BABY BLUES BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT