

---

## Editorial

# Utilizing COVID-19 Vaccine Diplomacy

Source: *Clinical Social Work and Health Intervention*  
Pages: 6 – 8

Volume: 13  
Cited references: 5

Issue: 1

---

CSWHI 2022; 13(1): 6 – 8; DOI: 10.22359/cswhi\_13\_1\_13 © Clinical Social Work and Health Intervention

### Abstract:

Vaccine diplomacy has become a significant consideration in the global effort to distribute Covid-19 vaccines from wealthier developed nations to poorer developing countries. Based upon a review of the secondary source literature, it appears that while vaccine diplomacy is expected to result in an increase in the quantities available for export, some pragmatic considerations may impede the effort to transport and administer the vaccine in less developed countries.

### Author's Biography

Prof. Costello is the assistant program director for the online MHA Degree program at the University of Scranton. He is a retired health care executive of a health system with two hospitals and a large multi-specialty physician practice. He has been teaching at the University of Scranton for 49 years.

### Key Words

COVID-19 Vaccines, Vaccine Diplomacy

### Introduction

With the rapid spread of the Omicron and Delta variants of COVID-19 worldwide public health specialists are increasingly stressing the importance of vaccination in slowing infection, hospitalization and death rates resulting from the viruses. However, since the vast majority of vaccines are produced in larger, more developed nations there is growing concern that ample quantities of vaccines are not reaching less developed countries where vaccination rates remain relatively low.

**Vaccine diplomacy** would seem to offer a promising means for the international community to balance the supply of COVID-19 vaccines so as to provide adequate supplies to meet population needs. Hotez (2014) defined vaccine diplomacy as;

“almost any aspect of global health diplomacy that relies on the use or delivery of vaccines and encompasses the important work of

Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, as well as elements of the WHO, the Gates Foundation and other important international organizations”

### Vaccine Diplomacy as International Cooperation

The concept of vaccine diplomacy predates the discovery of the COVID-19 virus and the subsequent development of the vaccines used to fight the viral infections. The prolific spread of the virus and its variants has led several prominent authorities to call for international cooperation in fighting the spread. Gupta (2021) writes:

“This is why we each have an obligation to make sure we help prevent outbreaks in distant lands. In an ideal scenario, the most vulnerable to a disease would be vaccinated first no matter where they live. Instead we find ourselves vaccinating a person every second in wealthy countries while some countries haven't received any vaccines at all. As of

Spring 2021, the vast majority of all vaccines have gone to high-income countries (reflecting 16% of the world's population) while less than 1% have gone to the low-income tier."

Hotez (2021) writes further:

"Vaccine diplomacy offers an approach and way of thinking to solve a pressing problem. We urgently need new vaccines to combat the return or emergence of diseases arising in the Anthropocene. Beyond the actual vaccines themselves, vaccine diplomacy offers a tactic to address urgencies that grow out of the framework for international scientific cooperation and collaboration, especially in times of conflict or political instability... We will need to invoke vaccine diplomacy for combating COVID-19"

In September 2021, Zhaohui Su and colleagues published the results of a narrative literature review which they had conducted. Citing limited research on vaccine diplomacy in light of vaccine empathy, the authors defined the distinction between vaccine empathy and vaccine diplomacy in writing:

"Vaccine empathy is an individual or a nation's capability to sympathize with other individuals or nations' vaccine wants and needs, whereas vaccine diplomacy is a nation's vaccine efforts that aim to build mutually beneficial relationships with other nations ultimately."

### Vaccine Diplomacy in Practice

How do individual nations engage in vaccine diplomacy? What definitive measures can producing nations take to facilitate the distribution of vaccines to nations in need?

The major COVID-19 vaccine producing nations and regions are the US, India, the UK, Russia, China and the European Union. These parties engage in COVID-19 vaccine diplomacy by utilizing a combination of practices.

- Contracting to sell to other nations directly or to sell to Covax, a part of Gavi, the international Vaccine Alliance which works to direct vaccine supplies to poorer countries.
- Donating COVID-19 vaccines to other nations and to Covax.

- Increasing the production of vaccines. As of late 2021, global manufacturers had produced nearly 11 billion doses (ibid).

The push toward COVID-19 vaccine diplomacy has encountered some practical difficulties which may have slowed global distribution to some degree.

1. As production has increased in larger nations, domestic demand has, in some instances, impeded global export to developing countries. Since many of the vaccine producing nations financed the development of the COVID-19 vaccines, political considerations may have kept early production within the borders of those countries.
12. Some producing nations such as the US and India imposed temporary restrictions on COVID-19 exports in order to meet their nations domestic needs.
13. Pricing appears to have caused some problems in vaccine diplomacy efforts with poorer nations citing concern of affordability. India, as an example, has committed to producing low-cost COVID-19 vaccines (Sharun and Dhama, 2021).
4. Some potential recipients of COVID-19 vaccines have expressed preference for the most efficacious vaccines, thereby hampering some diplomacy efforts.
5. Vaccine hesitancy, as witnessed among some segments of the US population, has also been observed in some poorer nations, thereby further complicating efficient distribution and vaccine administration.

### Conclusion

Certain factors would seem to indicate that larger quantities of COVID-19 vaccines will soon become available to poorer nations due to COVID-19 vaccine diplomacy. Some of the perceived obstacles to vaccine export are expected to resolve in the near future.

With 11 billion doses produced worldwide in calendar year 2021, distribution to poorer, less developed nations increased in the last six months of the year. Some of the larger vaccine manufacturers claim that early production difficulties have been resolved and that large volumes could be shipped to many poorer nations, assuming those nations have the infrastructure needed

to handle and administer the doses (Roland & Schwartz, 2021).

The very concept of vaccine diplomacy for COVID-19 vaccines seems to have received greater global acceptance. By the end of 2021, Covax had shopped more than 800 million doses with more than half donated by wealthy countries. A Gavi official said that donations were never part of the original Covax plan, meaning that more than 400 million doses come at no cost to the organization (ibid).

**Michael M. Costello**  
(University of Scranton  
School of Education, USA)

## References

1. GUPTA S (2021) *World War C*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
2. HOTEZ P J (2014) "Vaccine Diplomacy: Historical Perspectives and Future Direction." *PLOS Neglected Tropical Diseases* 2014 8<sup>(6)</sup> in Lee, ST (2021) "Vaccine Diplomacy: Nation Branding and China's COVID-19 Soft Power Play," *Place Brand Public Diplomacy*, July 6, 2021.
3. HOTEZ PJ (2021) *Preventing the Next Pandemic*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
4. ROLAND D & SCHWARTS F (2021) "More shots Flow to Poorer Nations." *Wall Street Journal*, December 29, 2021, p. A2.
5. SU ZJ, MCDONNELL D, LI XIAOSHAN (2021) "COVID-19 Vaccine Donations – Vaccine Empathy or Vaccine Diplomacy? A Narrative Literature Review" *Vaccines* 2021, 9, 1024.