

Brussels, 6 May 2021

**A watershed moment in the global fight against the pandemic: so far a strong opponent, now the United States supports the lifting of patents on COVID19 vaccines.**

The statement provoked a series of reactions from many high-level officials from European governments, including Germany<sup>1</sup>, Spain, Italy, Ireland, Sweden and the Netherlands. All positive, some somewhat toned, but expressing readiness to continue discussions at the intergovernmental level. French President followed Joe Biden in declaring that he is very much in favor of lifting patents on vaccines against COVID19. The Director General of the World Health Organisation reacted to the decision of the United States stating that “*this is a monumental moment*”. President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen responded in a more conservative way saying that the EU is open to discuss any effective and pragmatic solution that will help ramp up production to achieve global vaccination.

The proposal to temporarily lift the intellectual property rights of COVID19 vaccines was submitted to the World Trade Organisation by India and South Africa. Supported by over hundred countries, civil society organisations, as well as the scientific community and renowned economists, the suspension of patents is an essential measure to fight against the global shortage of vaccines and mobilize more production capacities.

The President of the European Commission and the European leaders, who until now were opposing the idea, seem to be now following the international momentum.

Responding to the global shortage of vaccines

Vaccination campaigns are accelerating in Europe and in the United States. At the same time, despite the vaccine being called a global public good, including by Emmanuel Macron at the onset of the pandemic, it remains inaccessible to most of the global population. Stark inequalities are visible in vaccination rates – high-income countries have already fully or partially inoculated 40% of their population. In comparison, middle- and low-income countries only managed to distribute jabs to 7.7% and less than 1% respectively. If nothing is done, some developing countries will not have access to vaccines until 2024. The whole world is racing against time to contain the virus and the shortage of vaccines plunges a number of countries into a dramatic position. Ramping up production and improving equitable access to COVID-19 countermeasures requires unprecedented mobilization. Global supply cannot rely solely on commercial prerogatives and exclusive rights of the pharmaceutical companies that own the technology.

Declarations to be made concrete

These long-awaited announcements are historic and must now lead to an acceleration of the ongoing negotiations at the World Trade Organization. It is crucial that an ambitious agreement is reached quickly and that the negotiations do not weaken the scope of the text proposed by India and South Africa.

*“We are concerned that in the war with the rampant pandemic, these obstacles add to the existing challenges of transferring know-how and supporting effective in-country delivery. The waiver of intellectual property rights is therefore a necessity but*

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<sup>1</sup> Later on Thursday, Germany rejected US plan to temporarily lift patents. For more details: <https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/germany-opposes-us-plan-waive-patents-covid-19-vaccines-2021-05-06/>

*not a sufficient condition to meet this global challenge and to catch up with equal access.”* Elise Rodriguez, Director of Advocacy, Global Health Advocates.

This temporary lifting of patents should make it possible to massively scale up production capacities in order to make the necessary doses available globally. At the same time, the international community must more than ever step up its efforts to support the transfer of technology and know-how. It is essential for the EU to help strengthen health systems and increase its financial support for the international solidarity mechanism allowing the deployment of vaccines, but also tests, treatments and protective equipment in low-income countries.

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