

For immediate release

6 May 2021

The Health Justice Initiative (HJI) welcomes the US government support of the ‘TRIPS Waiver’ proposal led by the governments of India and South Africa – and urges the European Union, UK, Canada, Australia, Norway, Japan, Switzerland and Brazil to follow suit.

‘These are the first major steps to vaccinate the world against COVID-19. The pressure from many individuals and groups has yielded far-reaching results with the US government supporting the TRIPS waiver, on vaccines. Now, text-based negotiations - as called for by South Africa and India - must be expedited and transparent, and not deferential to pharmaceutical companies – without watering down the original waiver proposal.

– Fatima Hassan, Director: HJI, Cape Town

The HJI welcomes the recent announcement by United States Trade Representative Katherine Tai that the US government supports the "waiving of intellectual property (IP) protections for COVID-19 vaccines".¹

It is an essential first step towards waiving IP rights for vaccines and to ensuring billions of people can access the vaccines that they now desperately need.

In October 2020, South Africa and India sponsored a proposal at the World Trade Organization (WTO) to temporarily waive certain provisions of the Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) agreement for the duration of the COVID-19 pandemic. This proposal has been supported by at least 100 countries, with the US and New Zealand now stating their support for the TRIPS waiver.

Several countries in the Global North – many of whom have procured enough vaccines to vaccinate their populations many times over² – have blocked the TRIPS waiver, including Canada, Australia, Norway, Switzerland, the EU, the United Kingdom, Japan and Switzerland.³

The HJI recognises the important role played by the South African and Indian governments since 2 October 2020 in calling for the waiver and the many groups and individuals around the world that have supported the call.

We call on all vaccine manufacturers to explicitly cooperate with global efforts to ramp up manufacturing including technology transfer and sharing of know-how, expeditiously – lives now depend on it.

About the Health Justice Initiative: the HJI is a South African non-profit organisation and a dedicated public health and law initiative. The organisation addresses the intersection between racial and gender inequality with a special focus on access to life-saving diagnostics, treatment and vaccines for COVID-19, TB, and HIV. For the HJI's timeline setting out significant local and global vaccine access developments, see: <https://healthjusticeinitiative.org.za/vaccine-equity/vaccine-timeline/>

¹ Statement from Ambassador Katherine Tai on the Covid-19 Trips Waiver, 05/05/2021, available <https://ustr.gov/about-us/policy-offices/press-office/press-releases/2021/may/statement-ambassador-katherine-tai-covid-19-trips-waiver>

² Ashley Kirk, Finbarr Sheehy and Cath Levett "Canada and UK among countries with most vaccine doses ordered per person" The Guardian, 29 January 2021, available <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jan/29/canada-and-uk-among-countries-with-most-vaccine-doses-ordered-per-person> (data provided by Duke Global Health Innovation Center up to 25 January 2021).

³ For a map depicting the countries that support, or do not support the waiver at present, or that are undecided, see: <https://twitter.com/astroehlein/status/1390040809978880002/photo/1>