

Open letter to Pfizer

A coalition of health rights campaigners argues Pfizer has 'blood on its hands' for upholding its vaccine monopolies during the pandemic, and calls for the company to share its vaccine technology with the WHO and potential manufacturers.

28 April 2022

To Pfizer's Executive Leadership,

We are writing as organisations and individuals working on global public health to express our deep concern at Pfizer's continuing failure to address inequitable global access to its COVID-19 vaccine and treatments.

As Pfizer's executives and shareholders gather to celebrate a year of record revenues at today's annual general meeting, it is vital the company finally acts decisively to put global access to COVID-19 vaccines and treatments ahead of the pursuit of extreme profits.

It is clear to us and campaigners around the world that there is a direct relationship between pharmaceutical profit incentives during the pandemic and the huge numbers of preventable deaths from COVID-19.

While Pfizer almost doubled its annual revenue to \$81.3bn in 2021, largely thanks to sales of its COVID-19 vaccine, the company failed people in low- and middle-income countries. Just 2% of the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine supply went to vaccine distribution mechanism COVAX, while 70% went to the richest section of the global population in high income countries. The disastrous reality is that 85% of people in low income countries are still waiting on their first dose.

Despite this inequitable distribution, Pfizer has consistently refused to share its vaccine technology and know-how with manufacturers in the global south, even while research shows that there are over 100 firms in Asia, Africa and Latin America that could have the capacity to produce mRNA vaccines. In this way, Pfizer has effectively maintained an extremely profitable monopoly on its vaccine and put safeguarding its future sales ahead of protecting human life in a global health emergency.

During this period of extreme vaccine inequality, people in low- and lower-middle income countries have been more likely to die from COVID-19. The pandemic has also acted as a multiplier to worsen inequalities, including across borders, and among women, girls and other marginalised groups. The UN recently described vaccine inequality as leading to "tens of thousands of preventable deaths every week". In this context, we believe that Pfizer's failure to share its vaccine technology and know-how during the pandemic means it has blood on its hands.

While Pfizer is one of the most shocking cases of a company profiteering from the pandemic, it is not the only company to have failed in its moral duty to share life-saving

vaccine technology and know-how. We extend these criticisms to all companies that have made extreme profits from the pandemic while refusing to share their vaccine know-how widely.

But Pfizer's failure looks even worse when you consider how much public money supported the vaccine's development. The mRNA technology that the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine relies on was underpinned by huge long-term public investment in R&D by the US government. BioNTech, which undertook the initial development of this vaccine, received substantial funding from the German government to support its development. The vaccine's production was also derisked by billions of dollars of public funds through advanced purchase agreements. A vaccine with such substantial public backing should be a people's vaccine, not an exclusive private monopoly.

The impact of Pfizer's failure to share its technology has been catastrophic and a change of course is needed urgently. By some estimates there remains a 15 billion dose gap in global supplies of mRNA vaccines for 2022. Compounding over a year of scandalous vaccine inequity, COVID-19 treatments are now likely to follow a similar pattern. This year's predicted supply of several key COVID-19 therapeutics, including Pfizer's Paxlovid, has already been bought up almost entirely by high-income countries.

It is imperative that Pfizer immediately moves to end the pandemic monopolies that put so many lives at risk.

We demand that Pfizer:

- Immediately shares its vaccine technology with the COVID-19 Technology Access Pool without conditions that might undermine the potential impact on global access.
- Drops all monopoly protections on its vaccine technology and proactively shares the know-how and trade secrets with potential manufacturers and the WHO-supported mRNA hubs.
- Drops all monopoly protections on the COVID-19 treatment nirmatrelvir/ritonavir (Paxlovid) and removes all conditions that curtail generic production and supply contained in the voluntary licence agreed with the Medicine Patent Pool.
- Commits to redirecting supplies of all COVID-19 products, at cost price, to ensure those with greatest need, such as vulnerable patients and health workers, are prioritised regardless of where they live.

Signatures:

STOPAIDS

Global Justice Now

Health GAP

South Asia Alliance for Poverty Eradication (SAAPE)

WeMove Europe

African Alliance

Treatment Action Group

Vaccine Advocacy Resource Group

Frontlineaids

New York Trade Justice Coalition
ActionAid International
Peoples Vaccine Alliance - Asia (PVA Asia)
Third World Network
SAfAIDS
Universities Allied for Essential Medicines
HelpAge International
Health Poverty Action
Just Treatment
ACT UP LONDON
Health Justice Initiative