

World mulls next step as US backs IP waiver on vaccines

May 6 2021, by Jamey Keaten



In this Monday, March 1, 2021 file photo, New Director-General of the World Trade Organisation Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, left, walks at the entrance of the WTO, following a photo-op upon her arrival at the WTO headquarters to take office in Geneva, Switzerland. Ambassadors from World Trade Organization countries were discussing trade rules protecting the technological know-how behind COVID-19 vaccines. The WTO's General Council's agenda for a two-day meeting starting Wednesday, May 5, 2021 includes a waiver on intellectual property protections for vaccines. (Fabrice Coffrini/Pool/Keystone via AP, File)

Activists cheered, Big Pharma complained and government leaders assessed next steps on Thursday after the Biden administration's blockbuster move to support an easing of patent and other protections on COVID-19 vaccines that many hope will help poorer countries get more doses and speed the end of the pandemic.

The move to support waiving intellectual property protections on vaccines under World Trade Organization rules marked a dramatic shift for the United States, which had previously lined up with many other developed nations opposed to the idea floated by India and South Africa.

Attention is set to turn to those richer nations, notably in the European Union, to see whether they will come on board. A key hurdle: Any decision at the WTO, a Geneva-based trade body, has to be by consensus—meaning that any single country could hold up any waiver.

The EU Commission president, Ursula von der Leyen, said the 27-nation bloc was ready to talk about the U.S. proposal—but cagily remained noncommittal for now.

"We are ready to discuss how the U.S. proposal for waiver on intellectual property protection for COVID vaccines could help" end the crisis, she said in a video address. "In the short run, however, we call upon all vaccine producing countries to allow exports and to avoid measures that disrupt supply chains."

That echoed the position of the global pharmaceutical industry, which insists a faster solution would be for rich countries that have vaccine stockpiles to start sharing them with poorer ones.

The industry insists that production of coronavirus vaccines is

complicated and can't be ramped up by easing [intellectual property protections](#). Instead, it insists that reducing bottlenecks in supply chains and a scarcity of ingredients that go into vaccines are the more pressing issues for now.



In this April 8, 2021, file photo, a Northwell Health registered nurses fills a syringe with the Johnson & Johnson COVID-19 vaccine at a pop up vaccination site at the Albanian Islamic Cultural Center in the Staten Island borough of New York. The Biden administration on Wednesday, May 5, joined calls for more sharing of the technology behind COVID-19 vaccines to help speed the end of the pandemic, a shift that puts the U.S. alongside many in the developing world who want rich countries to do more to get doses to the needy. (AP Photo/Mary Altaffer, File)

"A waiver is the simple but the wrong answer to what is a complex problem," said the International Federation of Pharmaceutical Manufacturers and Associations. "Waiving patents of COVID-19 vaccines will not increase production nor provide practical solutions needed to battle this global health crisis."

The industry also says an IP waiver will do more harm than good in the long run by reducing the incentives that push innovators to make tremendous leaps, as they did with the vaccines that have been churned out in a blistering, unprecedented speed to help fight COVID-19.

But civil society, progressive groups and international institutions were euphoric about the Biden administration's new stance, which marks a nearly complete reversal in U.S. policy under the Trump administration that was critical of both the WTO and the World Health Organization.

"A waiver of patents for #COVID19 vaccines & medicines could change the game for Africa, unlocking millions more [vaccine](#) doses & saving countless lives. We commend the leadership shown by South Africa, India & the United States, & urge others to back them," WHO Africa chief Matshidiso Moeti tweeted.

Doctors Without Borders, an advocacy group also known as Medecins Sans Frontieres that sends health workers to countries in need, said many low-income countries where it operates have only received 0.3% of the global supply of [coronavirus](#) vaccines.

"MSF applauds the U.S. government's bold decision to support the waiving of intellectual property on COVID-19 vaccines during this time of unprecedented global need," said Avril Benoît, executive director of MSF-USA.

She said any waiver should apply not just to vaccines, but other medical

tools for COVID-19, including treatments for infected people and testing systems.

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