

OPINION

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In poorer countries, COVID-19 treatments seem like a fairy tale

Lifesaving drugs out of reach, but we can fix that



Angel Gurría
Former OECD secretary-general

After more than two years of disruption, many of us are looking forward to a normal holiday season this year. The threat posed by COVID-19 has not gone away, but we are entering a new phase of the pandemic, with new tools that can prevent severe illness.

At this time of reflection, however, we must ask why these avenues remain the preserve of the richest.

Nearly 6 million Americans have been treated with Pfizer's Paxlovid, a medicine recommended by the World Health Organization to reduce the likelihood of hospitalization and death during a COVID-19 infection.

A study by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs has even suggested that Paxlovid could protect patients from developing long COVID.

For much of the world, however, treatments like Paxlovid might as well be a myth.

Only a quarter of Paxlovid gets to developing countries

Doctors in rural Haiti, Madagascar and Nigeria told researchers they had never heard of the medicine. Only a quarter of all orders of Paxlovid will go to developing countries.

This is acutely felt in Latin America. Being middle-income economies, most Latin American countries have been excluded from deals to license generic versions of COVID-19 medicines. As such, they face paying 10 times the price of a generic equivalent, \$250 instead of \$25, which is clearly unfair, particularly given Latin America's astounding pharmaceutical capacity.



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PFIZER/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

Developing countries have faced severe delays and, even when doses were available, any patient must test positive for COVID-19 before a medicine like Paxlovid can be prescribed.

In the West, COVID-19 tests are readily available in most pharmacies, but for every 50 tests administered in a rich country, just one is administered in a lower-income country.

These countries have already paid the highest price for this pandemic. After waiting far longer to receive vaccines, low-income countries have suffered four times more deaths than rich countries, worsening the economic shock of the acute phase of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Unless we ensure everyone has access to tests and treatments, the global consequences of the next phase will be no less dire.

We are only now beginning to understand the threat of long COVID-19. In the United States alone, it is keeping up to 4 million people out of work, costing the economy trillions of dollars.

While we don't yet know what impact it is having on developing countries, without access to treatments and tests, it will be devastating.

Hundreds of COVID-19 treatments

are being developed, including more than 70 in late-stage clinical trials. These could be more effective for preventing conditions like long COVID.

Unless governments urgently intervene, they also will remain out of reach for most persons.

COVID-19 questions at World Trade Organization

Earlier in the pandemic, President Joe Biden won international acclaim by supporting a waiver of the intellectual property rules that prevent low- and middle-income countries from producing COVID-19 vaccines. He stood strong in the face of a determined lobbying effort from the U.S. pharmaceutical industry, declaring that the United States was back on the world stage.

The deal ultimately reached at the World Trade Organization (WTO), however, was far more limited.

Rather than waive intellectual property rules, it provided a new route for countries to produce COVID-19 vaccines without a patent holder's consent and with fewer export restrictions. This constituted a tweak to rules for producing generic medicines, rather than a radical departure from the status quo.

On June 17, WTO members pledged they'd reach a decision on all COVID-19 medicines, including tests and treatments, within six months.

Thursday is supposed to be the final WTO meeting before the deadline. But, last week, the United States asked for more time.

Washington has had more than two years to consider the issue. A further delay will not benefit those facing the consequences of COVID-19.

Support the production of lifesaving generics

Bringing tests and treatments into this deal would give every country the tools to help their populations through the next phase of the pandemic. Treatments and tests are easier to store and administer than vaccines, particularly in countries with weaker health systems and storage facilities.

Moreover, unlike vaccines, patents are the only real barrier stopping many lower-income countries from producing cheaper generics.

My own country, Mexico, has not taken a clear position. The government initially advocated for a full intellectual property waiver for vaccines, tests and treatments, but then joined those who question the need for action on the latter and reportedly called for a "compromise" that would limit a deal to certain products.

Washington can seriously influence political dynamics at the WTO. The support of the United States and Mexico, two key players of the Americas, will embolden other neighboring countries to support the production of lifesaving generics.

Bringing treatments and tests into the WTO's deal would not be a radical departure from the status quo. It is, however, a small tweak that could save countless lives and a major step in ensuring that everyone, everywhere can endure the next stage of the COVID-19 pandemic.

This could positively impact and fuel the global economic recovery – a remarkable Christmas gift to the world.

Angel Gurría, secretary-general of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development from 2006 until 2021, served in the government of Mexico as minister of Foreign Affairs and minister of Finance and Public Credit. He is an honorary member of Club de Madrid. Follow him on Twitter: @A_Gurría



HBO Max's "Santa Camp" documentary shows nonprofit New England Santa Society tackling the lack of diversity among Santa stand-ins. HBO MAX VIA AP

I'm 'woke' and so is US capitalism, for good reasons

It's all about customers, profit and performance



Jill Lawrence
USA TODAY

I saw a TV ad for Target gift cards recently and realized I was watching it as if I were an own-the-libs conservative (which, dear reader, I assure you I am not). "Woke! Woke!" I thought as conventional Christmas cheer gave way to a Hanukkah menorah, a Black Santa, "Feliz Navidad" and a 100% agnostic snowflake.

This is diversity, equity and inclusion at its most American: a giant company trying to maximize profit by marketing to every possible potential customer. Whatever your race, religion or country of origin, Target wants your money. Love dogs? Feeling nostalgic about the past? Target's got a gift card for you.

Diversity is a foundational national and cultural value for me and tens of millions of other Americans – but it's also a proven capitalist value. This is an underutilized argument for immigration advocates, educators, business leaders, patriots and ethnic food lovers as diversity goals come under challenge, and sometimes attack, from conservatives trying to recreate a country that no longer exists.

Racial, economic and gender diversity make "organizations from Wall Street to Main Street more profitable, productive, financially sound and responsive to customers," Ronald A. Crutcher wrote in a 2018 USA TODAY column when he was president of the University of Richmond.

'A threat to our economy'

Last summer, as the Supreme Court prepared to hear arguments over whether public universities may consider race in admissions, "major American business enterprises" from Accenture to Zazzle elaborated on Crutcher's point in a brief citing more than 40 authorities. The brief documented "a whole extensive, rigorous peer-reviewed literature that diverse groups of people actually perform at a higher level," North Carolina Solicitor General Ryan Park told the court.

The Republican brand is business-friendly, but conservatives often draw the line at corporations they consider "woke." GOP lawmakers in Georgia punished Atlanta-based Delta Air Lines for ending discounts to the National Rifle Association after the school shooting in Parkland, Florida. Congressional Republicans tried to punish Major League Baseball when it pulled the All-Star Game from Georgia over voting restrictions.

Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis punished Disney – famous for its popular "Gay Days" – for opposing a law limiting classroom discussion of LGBTQ issues. He says a new federal law protecting same-sex marriage could encroach on religious liberty and "there

was certainly no need" for it. And he's among many Republicans working to restrict what teachers and corporate trainers can say about race.

Perhaps most damaging, former President Donald Trump's antipathy to immigration is now widespread in the GOP. DeSantis and Texas Gov. Greg Abbott, for instance, are unilaterally busying and flying asylum seekers to other states to show how tough they are. That's even though the results of less immigration include less diversity and a shrunken workforce.

The latest Labor Department report showed 10.3 million U.S. job openings in October – high enough to drive up wages and inflation as companies search for scarce workers. Federal Reserve Chairman Jerome Powell attributes the scarcity in part to "a plunge in net immigration." Labor Secretary Marty Walsh calls the U.S. immigration system "a threat to our economy."

The American dream

The crisis of the moment is what to do about more than 600,000 "Dreamers" brought here illegally by their parents when they were children. President Barack Obama created a stopgap program in 2012, Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, but Congress never gave them legal status. Now a court challenge to DACA threatens to upend their lives and the U.S. economy.

Ending the program "means that an estimated 22,000 jobs would be lost every month for two years. That is roughly 1,000 job losses per business day at a time when the U.S. economy already faces significant workforce shortages," dozens of corporate giants, business groups, education associations and others told congressional leaders in a letter.

GOP donors made similar economic arguments to party leaders in June.

Democrats have said that protecting the Dreamers is a priority for them before Christmas, and a new bipartisan compromise is in the works. Its prospects are iffy but the rush is imperative. That's because Republicans take over the House in January and aspiring Speaker Kevin McCarthy pledged months ago that "amnesty is a non-starter. It won't be taken up by a House Republican majority."

I know Michael Jordan took grief for saying "Republicans buy sneakers, too." But they do. And so do people of different colors, ethnicities and religions, and people who do not fit the mom-dad-buddy-and-sis mold that some believers want to force on everyone.

Last spring I went to a concert, the first I had attended since the pandemic hit, and these were the soloists playing a Bach concerto for three violins: An Asian American, a Ukrainian American and Carmen Lavada Johnson-Pájaro, who is a quarter African American, a quarter Cherokee and half Colombian.

As the full impact of that lineup hit me, tears came to my eyes. Seriously, is America a great country or what?

Now go buy some gifts.

Jill Lawrence is a columnist for USA TODAY and author of "The Art of the Political Deal: How Congress Beat the Odds and Broke Through Gridlock." Follow her on Twitter: @JillDLawrence