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Vaccine nationalism is a recipe for disaster

While Europe celebrates the end of the pandemic, Covid-19 continues to ravage across Global South countries like Nepal. That puts everyone at risk

Once more the Covid-19 pandemic is holding up a mirror to our globalised world – at least for those who dare to look. While in Europe vaccination campaigns are picking up and people are getting excited at the prospect of the 'end of the pandemic', in other parts of the world the virus is raging worse than ever.

Take a look at Nepal: While the Global North enjoys renewed freedoms and many are busy with planning their summer holidays, in Nepal the monsoon season has started. The rain it brings – like every year – is the source of life for the local agriculture, millions of people depend on, but it also generates devastating floods and landslides isolating parts of the country.

Since Covid-19 has long spread to the countryside, many people are left without access to proper health care beyond the most basic treatments. In Nepalese villages there are no sufficient ICU beds, oxygen cylinders, testing facilities and, most likely, no proper counting of the Covid-19 cases and deaths.

Nepal: a hard-hit country

A couple of weeks ago, Nepal might well have been the hardest hit country in the ongoing pandemic. While the world was in shock about the huge number of cases and the suffering in India, it largely overlooked the Nepalese tragedy. At the peak, the country registered more than 9,000 new cases and 200 deaths daily. And even though this might not sound like a lot compared to the Indian numbers or previous waves in Europe, it should be noted that the positivity rate reached a staggering 50 per cent.

Every second Covid-19 test in Nepal was positive, while India's positivity rate 'only' peaked between 20 and 25 per cent during the last wave. Obviously, Nepal's Covid-19 cases were massively underreported and so were the fatalities. It was difficult for patients to find hospital beds, both in the urban centres as well as in smaller towns. In search for treatment for their loved ones, many desperately turned to social media groups to find medical oxygen or to locate one of the last ICU beds. At times, the crematoriums were facing more bodies than they were able to handle.

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Meanwhile, more than 400 climbers were preparing to summit the world's highest mountain – and most continued even when the first Covid-19 cases were confirmed at base camp. The Nepalese authorities had issued a record number of climbing permits for Mount Everest. The country had let its guard down and the Nepalese government had lifted almost all restrictions. The tourism sector – which used to contribute nearly eight per cent to GDP and provided more than 10 per cent of jobs in the country – was desperately looking for recovery. The open border between Nepal and India, which is frequently crossed by migrant workers in both directions without testing, has further worsened the situation.

Nepal's economy cannot sustain the lockdown

Although Nepal is not exporting much, it is very much connected to the global economy. The country's economy is dependent on imports for almost everything, even many essential items like food, fertiliser, and gasoline. In addition, the economy depends on the remittances of labour migrants that contribute 25-30 per cent to the GDP. It is the economy's lifeline, but many of those working in the Gulf, Malaysia, or South Korea have been returning or not been able to go back to their jobs abroad.

Apart from many individual tragedies that labour migrants lived through because of travel restrictions and airport closures, these also pose a significant threat to the Nepalese economy. Unlike other countries, for Nepal it is not an option to shut itself off from the world for extended periods of time.

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cases have been decreasing again, it is also obvious that the reduction of tests played a massive role. The positivity rate is still around 25 per cent. But on the other hand: How long can a country like Nepal endure an economically devastating lockdown?

Politics above governance in Nepal

On top of all that, Nepal is facing an ongoing political crisis. Recently, the House of Representatives, one of Nepal's two parliamentary chambers, was dissolved by president Bidya Devi Bhandari on recommendation of Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli, who is fighting for his political survival since early 2020 – actually, for the second time in the space of six months. While the first time was already deemed unconstitutional by the Nepalese Supreme Court, the second dissolution is still under review. However, with the ongoing political limbo the pandemic management is being delegated to the backseat.

Recently, the Nepalese Prime Minister reshuffled his government for the 18th time in the government's little more than three years in office to save his premiership once again. This recent reshuffle, however, has been stopped and deemed unconstitutional by the Supreme Court. Yet, unfortunately, there is little indication that Nepal's political crisis will be resolved soon.

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The ongoing political limbo will make it even harder for the country to get out of the Covid-19 crisis. However, even though the devastating impacts of the pandemic in Nepal are partially homemade, there are also important external factors for the fallout in Nepal.

The changing tides of vaccine geopolitics

While the vaccination campaign had a promising start in Nepal, it came to a standstill a few months ago. In early 2021, in a bid to increase its influence again, Nepal received 1.1 million doses of the Covishield vaccine from India. However, today, with the Indian export ban on vaccines, Nepal lacks enough vaccine doses to follow-up and many Nepalis are still, more than 12 weeks after receiving the first jab, waiting to receive their second shot.

Unsurprisingly, the Chinese neighbour, who has been a player of rising

prominence during recent years, stepped in and provided 1.8 million doses. Nepal also received some doses from the WHO under the Covax facility and of late the US has explicitly named Nepal in the vaccines it has dedicated to Asian countries through Covax as well. And even if lately more vaccine deliveries have been announced through Covax and a deal to buy vaccines from China has been closed, still, less than three per cent of Nepal's population has been jabbed.

While vaccination in the developed world has already taken momentum and half of the population has been vaccinated in some countries, in most of the countries of the Global South the situation is much bleaker. In times when vaccinations are a top priority for almost every state, getting vaccines increasingly turns into an uphill task for low-income countries like Nepal. Many countries in the Global South, including Nepal, will have to survive on the mercy of those few who control the entire production and distribution of vaccines in the global market.

As it stands, the vaccinations largely follow national geopolitical interests. For vulnerable countries like Nepal, this means that herd immunity most likely can only be reached the hard way. Such an approach to fighting a global pandemic is clearly a recipe for disaster. However, while there is growing criticism towards Russia and China for their vaccine geopolitics, the international community has failed to come up with any concrete solutions as well, as countries like Germany have prevented the lifting of patent rights on vaccines.

While rich countries are hoarding vaccines, others have no access or cannot afford lifesaving drugs. You do not have to be a fortuneteller to see that this will increase inequality and divide the world further. Neither geopolitics, nor national economic interests should be played out in a way that risks so many human lives. The only way out of this will be constructive and decisive international cooperation.

Though, the state of the world is less than promising in this regard, especially with the growing confrontation between the US and China, hopefully the major players in vaccine politics will soon realise that they are actually hampering their own long-term interests. While the highly infectious Delta variant, which was first confirmed in India, threatens to bring a fresh round of lockdowns to Europe, it should be obvious that — with the risk of further mutations — vaccine nationalism can prove a very dangerous approach for all of us.



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