

Covid-19 vaccines**Former world leaders call on Biden to suspend Covid-19 vaccine patents**

Gordon Brown one of 175 figures urging action to boost inoculation rates in the developing world



Gordon Brown along with the other former leaders and Nobel laureates, say suspending patents 'was a vital and necessary step to bringing an end to this pandemic' © Oli Scarff/AFP/Getty Images

Aime Williams in Washington 2 HOURS AGO

Be the first to know about every new Coronavirus story



 **Get instant email alerts**

A group of 175 former world leaders and Nobel laureates is urging the US to take “urgent action” to suspend intellectual property rights for Covid-19 vaccines to help boost global inoculation rates.

A measure to allow countries to temporarily override patent rights for Covid-related medical products was proposed at the World Trade Organization by India and South Africa in October, and has since been backed by nearly 60 countries.

Doing so would allow developing countries to make their own copies of the [vaccines](#) that have been developed by pharmaceutical companies without fear of being sued for intellectual property infringements.

“A WTO waiver is a vital and necessary step to bringing an end to this pandemic. It must be combined with ensuring vaccine knowhow and technology is shared openly,” the signatories, comprising more than 100 Nobel prizewinners and over 70 former world leaders, wrote in a letter to US president Joe Biden, seen by the Financial Times.

They added a waiver in tandem with other measures would “expand global manufacturing capacity, unhindered by industry monopolies that are driving the dire supply shortages blocking vaccine access”.

While wealthier countries have access to doses of Covid vaccines and are increasing vaccination programmes for their populations, developing economies have so far had more limited access to doses.

Former leaders who signed the letter included Gordon Brown, former UK prime minister; François Hollande, former French president; Mikhail Gorbachev, former president of the USSR; and Yves Leterme, former Belgian prime minister.

Hollande branded the inequality in access to vaccines “an unbearable political and moral situation”, that was “economic nonsense”.

The individuals who signed the letter, including Nobel laureates in economics as well as from across the arts and sciences, warned that inequitable vaccine access would impact the global economy and prevent it from recovering.

“The world saw unprecedented development of safe and effective vaccines, in major part thanks to US public investment,” the group wrote. “We all welcome that vaccination rollout in the US and many wealthier countries is bringing hope to their citizens.”

“Yet for the majority of the world that same hope is yet to be seen. New waves of suffering are now rising across the globe. Our global economy cannot rebuild if it remains vulnerable to this virus.”

Latest coronavirus news



The group warned that fully enforcing IP was “self-defeating for the US” as it hindered global vaccination efforts. “Given artificial global supply shortages, the [US economy](#) already risks losing \$1.3tn in gross domestic product this year.”

Follow FT's live coverage and analysis of the global pandemic and the rapidly evolving economic crisis [here](#).

US business groups, including pharmaceutical industry representatives, have urged Biden to [resist supporting a waiver](#) to IP rules at the WTO, arguing that

the proposal led by India and South Africa was too “vague” and “broad”.

The US has previously opposed a waiver for Covid-19 products, along with the UK, EU and Switzerland.

The US trade representative's office said late last month that it was “exploring every avenue” and “evaluating the efficacy” of the proposal to waive so-called Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights.

Katherine Tai, US trade representative, told a WTO meeting on vaccine equity on Wednesday that both the government and the private sector would need to do their part to “live up to” the “spirit” of the Trips agreement, which was born out of the HIV crisis.

“We hope to hear more today about how the market once again has failed in meeting the health needs of developing countries,” Tai said. “As part of that we have to consider what modifications and reforms to our trade rules might be necessary to reflect what we have learned.”

Countries already have the ability to make their own generic versions of branded drugs and vaccines by issuing so-called compulsory licenses under the WTO Trips agreement, but so far none has for Covid-19 products.

[Joseph Stiglitz](#), a Nobel laureate in economics, told the FT that the compulsory license rule already in place indicated that the principles of pausing patents in emergencies had been accepted by the international community.

However, developing countries have often been reluctant to take advantage of the compulsory license option for fear of diplomatic blowback, he said. “Historically, the US has always threatened countries that have used it,” Stiglitz said. “So we've agreed to it, but we undermine it.”

He said governments had made funding available for research into vaccines, and that pharmaceutical companies had “already made their profit”.

“And we know that next time something like this happens, the government will come forward and help pay for the development of the vaccines because the economic trade-off between the loss of trillions versus a few billions of dollars for research is a no brainer.”