



EXPERIENCES FROM THE FIELD

WE WON'T SAVE OURSELVES ALONE

One thing that Covid-19 ought to have taught us by now is that no one can save themselves alone, but we're in a kind of "health nationalism" in which the stronger countries are trying to protect themselves first and losing sight of the fact that only by sharing and making vaccines and patents accessible can we achieve shared protection.

CHIARA DI BENEDETTO INTERVIEW SILVIO A. GARATTINI, INSTITUTE OF PHARMACOLOGICAL RESEARCH MARIO NEGRI IRCCS

The map of cases from March 2020 to now has been in constant flux and the pandemic has overwhelmed countries and continents at different times and with different outcomes. Now the access to medicine and especially vaccine has become a point of difference between countries, leaving poorer countries further behind. Or to be more exact, we should say access to vaccination. One difficulty of access to the vaccine is economic when the "big guys" look after their own population in a kind of health nationalism. But something that Covid-19 should have perhaps taught us is that no one can save themselves alone and there being regions still exposed to the Covid-19 storm, even if they are geographically distant, presents a risk for other parts of the globe.

We talked about it with Silvio Garattini, founder of the Pharmaceutical Institute Mario Negri IRCCS who in recent months has repeatedly brought attention to the topic of vaccines as a common good.

o What is the global "snapshot" of the vaccination situation right now? Are the inequalities as great as they seem?

Wealthy countries have a good vaccination rate although we have certainly not achieved herd immunity, while low-income countries, especially in Africa and South America, have gotten only scraps at the moment. It is absolutely urgent to vaccinate the whole world. According to the Public Citizens organization, this would be possible at the cost of 23 billion dollars for 8 billion doses available in a year, the amount needed to vaccinate everyone.

o India and South Africa have asked the *World Trade Organization*, WTO for an exemption from patents and other intellectual property rights in relation to drugs and vaccines for the duration of the pandemic, until immunity is achieved. Is that a possible path?

Unfortunately, the response was not positive from the wealthy countries to the request from India and South Africa. However, the question is still open, and we hope that Europe will take a more positive attitude. The good news is that last Monday an amendment was approved, proposed by the former Minister of Health Grillo, which in Italy makes a "compulsory license" possible, a temporary suspension of the patent when there are important conditions of public health.

o Is considering vaccines a common good – like water or the natural environment – Utopian, or can we find a way to make it a reality even in extremely fragile countries such as in sub-Saharan Africa?

It's not utopian to think of vaccines as a common good, it's a necessity. It's not even an act of charity, like many people think, but a "healthy" selfishness if we think that the virus continuing to run loose in large areas gives rise to variants, which because of globalization, will come back to us. The example of the Delta variant, which originated in India, spreading throughout Europe is an example of the virus's circulation.

o Do you think that countries in the global south, including Africa, in the near future could somehow contribute to pharmaceutical research and become producers themselves? And could that change the fate of drug distribution?

I think it is absolutely necessary to set up production facilities in some low-income countries, certainly in Africa. Only by having local producers, can there be rapid distribution.

o The Covid-19 pandemic has shown us how powerfully we are connected to each other and that one part of the world cannot be considered "safe" if another area is in danger. Are we forgetting that already?

It has already been said by others before me: "We will not save ourselves alone!" This has to be repeated if we want to return to normal.

o At Cuamm, we have been working in sub-Saharan Africa for over 70 years. What role do you think we could play as NGOs in the field to promote health justice?

I know Cuamm's commitment and I believe it is fundamental on many levels. By continuing to spread the idea that the unfairness of inequality does not, of course, have only to do with vaccines; by promoting the need to start to build vaccine and pharmaceutical production facilities in sub-Saharan Africa. This must be done, of course, by continuing the action to build basic health facilities in those countries.