

## The Good Messengers

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The dissemination of critical information about natural disasters, including pandemics, is premised on international cooperation with transparency and good faith. This requires countries to alert the world as soon as they can about the dangers posed by new pathogens and their variants, so that resources can be mobilized early to assist countries in the “hot zone” of viral risk. The earlier such information is shared, and the more openly, the better it is for the international community. For this reason, one would think that early warnings given by countries would be incentivized, as the externality benefits of awareness far outweigh any procedural opaqueness. Yet this is precisely what is not being done in the wake of the new Omicron variant of Covid-19, which was first detected in South Africa in late November.

This variant possesses many different mutations, including some that are novel, which is why it has generated an immediate panic in many countries and has been flagged as a “variant of concern,” since it may exhibit different properties in terms of transmission, evasiveness (to detection), and resistance to existing Covid-19 vaccines. These reasons have led many countries to place restrictions on travel from South Africa and left both foreigners and locals with travel agendas stranded in the country. In a sense, South Africa is being punished for having transparently presented a global risk. Instead of mobilizing aid to the southern African region, countries are going straight for shutting the gates on the country that it may somehow fend for itself in this difficult situation. Ironically, such restrictions have not prevented the Omicron variant from being detected on other continents including Europe and Asia already.

The perverse logic of shooting the messenger has not staved off the public health risk, and has in fact worsened it by leaving countries in southern Africa to their own devices. This speaks to a general *salvese quien pueda* (every man for himself) logic that has emerged in the wake of the pandemic. Rather than working as a united global community, under the stewardship of the World Health Organization, countries have gone for self-centered policies that cannot resolve a problem that is inherently global in nature. The worst example of this attitude might be in the “vaccine nationalism” that rich countries have adopted since September, 2020, focusing specifically on inoculating their own populations, while forgetting about the international requirements for pandemic management. There is, of course, a very sound basis for any country to prioritize its own people, but vaccine nationalism is a state of excess emphasis on one’s own country - at the expense of the world community.

This excess effort has been extremely problematic, and is at the root of the problem at hand: the emergence of a variant of concern in Africa. For the past year, global health experts have been urging governments in the first world to take seriously the need to protect and inoculate developing countries, particularly in Africa where vaccine rates have been vanishingly low. The experts have been cautioning that the rich countries are ignoring the poor ones at their own peril, and magnifying the risk that an ultra-powerful (evasive and resistant) strain would emerge there. For anyone observing the international health data on cases, deaths, and vaccination rates, it would be self-evident that a strain like Omicron would emerge, and now it has. But the response of the world is once again to punish a developing country by shutting it off entirely, without recognizing the larger problem of lopsided international development. In such a distorted international system, South Africa may have been better off concealing its data on the new strain, much as the dishonest government in India did during the eruption of the Delta variant.

Shooting the messenger is not a new phenomenon in global public health, but it is one that leads to unfair narratives and unfair policies. The 1918 Spanish Influenza pandemic, which is the last major disease outbreak to which Covid-19 might be compared, was in fact not from Spain. Its origins were either in the Far East or North America, but the moniker of “Spanish” Influenza stuck because the Spanish press at the time was freely

and transparently reporting the public health crisis at a time when many other countries were muzzling wartime presses. The outbreak was therefore remembered mistakenly as having to do with the community which most accurately tracked and monitored a problem which emerged elsewhere.

In order to draw upon a better-connected and effective global health response, we must work towards encouraging active reporting of data, rather than distorting the incentives to push governments into opaqueness which ultimately harms the world at large. The good messengers wouldn't be sanctioned for doing their duty to the world. At the same time, we should be mobilizing towards vaccination targets with worldwide coverage that are not shaped by perverse profit motives or excessive politicization. With the ad-hoc and self-centered approaches of those in power in rich companies and governments, it was but a matter of time that Omicron would emerge. The risk now is that further strains of even greater potency, evasion, and resistance may still emerge in the future, and this might come to defeat the entire purpose of vaccination, leading us back to square one, but with all the good messengers now dead.

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