

## Report Covid and the politicization of the aid

Since Covid-19 spread around the world, the world witnessed many examples of harsh geo-politics in regard to the distribution of care and protection globally. To explore in more detail how geo-politics on local, national and regional scale interfered with humanitarian action in COVID-responses, KUNO and Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam organized an expert meeting on September 16, 2021. During this working session three case studies were discussed: Venezuela, India and (China in) Africa. **Peter Heintze (KUNO)** and **Eva van Roekel (Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam)** jointly moderated the session.

### **Venezuela: the politicization of vaccines**

**Manuela Bolívar**, Member of Venezuelan Congress (opposition party) and vice-president of the Venezuelan Humanitarian Aid Program & **Gerardo Gonzalez Maldonado**, sociologist and PhD candidate of Leiden University presented the first case study.

Venezuela is a Latin American country that faces a new wave in the pandemic and shows several examples of how Covid-aid can be used for political goals on the local and national level:

- The vaccines that are available in Venezuela mostly come from geopolitical allies of President Maduro. Sinopharm in China covers the largest supply in Venezuela, as in many Latin American countries. Sputnik vaccines from Russia are the second largest, however, until the date of the presentation, follow-up vaccines with Sputnik had been put to a halt due to problems in supply chain leaving many elderly people without the necessary second vaccination. Finally, a very small percentage of Abdala from Cuba is available. It remains unclear if more Cuban vaccines will arrive.
- Initially, the regime stated that they did not have the funds to become part of the Covax program (the UN-led program to strengthen access to COVID vaccines). However, after an alternative for the funding was found, the regime paid an extra fee to the Covax program, which enabled them to decide upon which vaccines they would want to use in Venezuela (Sinopharm). This money could have been used in a better way according to the presentators e.g. to integrate a formal vaccination plan. The result was that Venezuelans had to wait, until OMS approved the Sinopharm vaccine and China filled that void and quickly became the main supplier of vaccines in Venezuela.
- There are various indications that the vaccine program is currently being used for internal political goals. For example, in the present electoral campaign for regional and municipal election the regime is using the vaccine program to promote their candidates.
- Overall lack of transparency is a complicating factor in the treatment of Covid-19 in Venezuela. There is ongoing unclarity about the numbers of distributed vaccines as reliable information is simply not released. Various Venezuelan civil society organisations and international humanitarian agencies try to create space for sharing experiences to create more transparency and greater access to information.
- For the Venezuelan context, it is relevant to note that Covid-19 is not the main problem for Venezuelans. Venezuela has been facing multiple humanitarian problems for a couple of years: a lack of income, public services, and food insecurity. Covid-19 is simply another problem added to this list and has been used by the government to cover up the already existing problems Venezuelans face.

### **India: increased risk for local actors**

**Sudhanshu S. Singh**, founder and CEO of Humanitarian Aid International – India, presented the second case study.

- Transferring risks to local humanitarian actors is a recurring problem. Even before the Covid-19 pandemic ‘hit the ground’ in India, Sudhanshu witnessed increasingly the colonization of humanitarian aid in India. When the Covid-19 pandemic hit, many people were afraid to go

outside, risking they might get infected. Nonetheless, workers for local aid organizations did not have any other option than to go out on the streets and do their work. However, most of the local organizations did not get grants nor do they have social security to perform their work adequately, like large international aid organisations in India. According to Singh, all aid workers that passed away because of Covid-19 in India have been local and national actors. This shows the ugly reality of transferring the risk to local organizations: local organizations were used as cheap implementers without the proper equipment and protection.

- The problem of under-funding of local NGOs for the treatment of Covid-19 remains. When the second wave hit and the whole world saw the terrible pictures of cramped hospitals in India, a lot of money was mobilized for India. However, these funds were again not transferred to local organizations. This was in a time when every penny had to be used very efficiently. Yet, the life and the dignity of workers of local organizations were not regarded nor respected.
- Furthermore, India already started vaccinating its citizens from early January 2021 onwards. As the Indian government also has its ambition to become a global leader, with hegemony in the region, India produced two vaccines, namely Covishield and Covaxin. In addition, India started sending out vaccines to many other countries. The biggest part was sent with a commercial goal though. While the second wave hit hard in India, a massive opposition to this policy of Indian vaccines arose. Why was the government exporting vaccines while its own citizens needed it? Eventually, in April the Indian government decided to no longer export any vaccines and distribute it entirely for internal use, losing out on political influence in the region. Currently, the vaccination coverage in India is high in comparison to our region.

### **China in Africa: a bit of donations, a lot of business**

**Eric Olander**, Managing Editor of the China Africa Project presented the last case study on China's role in the distribution of vaccines in Africa.

- There are many misconceptions about China's influence and its humanitarian role in the world. A lot of people think that Chinese donations play a much larger role than they actually do. Data from ??? shows that most of the Chinese vaccines have been sold instead of donated to third countries, particularly in Africa and Latin America. According to Eric Olander this shows that for China vaccines are first and foremost a promising business and not a geopolitical investment. Additionally, China sells its vaccines often for high prices to lower income countries too.
- Nonetheless, the Chinese vaccines are going where their geopolitical interests are. Africa stands out, because of the fact that there are not a lot of European, Russian or US vaccines are sold there. Even more so, the majority of Chinese vaccines that are distributed in Africa are spread very thinly. The majority of vaccines has been sold (and partially donated) to only six African countries.
- The provocative point that Eric Olander made was the failure of the United States and Europe to assume global leadership on vaccine distribution. Furthermore, he also pointed out that the failure of international aid agencies and humanitarian business to pressure and to bring awareness to a growing absence of Europe and the United States in global vaccine distribution has created the opening for the Chinese and for the Russians in places like Venezuela and various African and Latin American countries.
- The issue of efficacy is another point of attention. There exists a dominant narrative in Europe and the United States that Chinese vaccines are less effective, which is only correct if you focus on the infection rate. However, public health officials in Global South countries instead now focus more on the reduction of hospitalization and death and not so much on infection rates. Regarding those two metrics, the Chinese vaccine is performing quite well. This means that we have to cut through the misinformation in dominant US and EU narratives about efficacy and trust in Chinese vaccines and the different perceptions that exist between the Global South and the Global North.