



Credit: Philani Mthembu

Travel bans erode global trust

Global crises require tight international cooperation. Unilateral measures such as travel bans are often not rooted in science; instead of fostering cooperation, they impede communication, discourage transparency and hinder evidence-based decision-making, writes Philani Mthembu.

In March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a pandemic, ushering in a difficult period globally — especially in the Global South, as the various measures adopted to tackle the pandemic have continued to have a negative effect on the economy and various social indicators. This can be seen through the stagnation and worsening of the human development indicators for the first time since they were developed in 1990. In many countries, unemployment rates have increased and governments have not had the necessary financial resources to compensate businesses and individuals that had to adjust their operations to combat the pandemic.

What has become clear is that the pandemic caught the world ill-prepared for the type of decisions and cooperation that would need to take place to navigate the pandemic and its consequences. Many of the recommendations of the WHO have been ignored, especially by influential countries in the Global North. These include recommendations on a temporary waiver on intellectual property rights for the production of vaccines needed to meet the global demand and combat the inequality of production and distribution, and on travel bans, which WHO continues to insist are unscientific and disproportionately affect developing countries.

The two issues of vaccine production and distribution, and travel bans, are intricately linked, in that they both demonstrate an adherence to blind self-interest in the pandemic response. The reluctance amongst countries of the Global North to support a temporary waiver has — as predicted — contributed to the emergence of new strains of COVID-19, with the latest Omicron variant being first sequenced and reported in South Africa. Despite imposing travel bans, evidence later emerged that the new variant may have already been present and circulating in Europe earlier than initially

thought — further evidence that unilateral travel bans do not work as a response to new variants. Although many had hoped that the pandemic would usher in an era of scientific and evidence-based decision-making, it can be argued that perhaps the opposite has been the case, as countries have adopted inward-looking national policies to the detriment of evidence-based decision-making and global cooperation.

One of the biggest casualties of the pandemic has been multilateralism and global cooperation, seen on full display in the recent successful sequencing of the Omicron variant by scientists in South Africa. What should have been a positive story for science, transparency and international cooperation was quickly turned upside-down as countries hastily imposed travel bans on countries in southern Africa, despite not having empirical data on some of the key characteristics of the newly sequenced Omicron variant. This may be seen as a metaphor for the contemporary state of multilateralism and global cooperation, in which the correct actions by scientists in South Africa and the South African government were punished instead of being rewarded.

With international cooperation and coordination at a historic low during the pandemic, the inability to take the necessary collective measures to shorten the duration of the pandemic has arguably contributed to greater levels of distrust towards both governments and the measures they have proposed, and towards pharmaceutical companies and the vaccines that they have managed to develop in record time. The distrust, especially in Africa and the Global South more broadly, has also stemmed from the fact that some governments and corporations in the Global North have promoted their own national interests and profits at the expense of a coordinated approach to the benefit of the collective.

Adding to this has been the implementation of uncoordinated and disruptive travel bans that serve only the domestic interests of politicians who want to be seen as doing something, when in fact the pandemic has proven that travel bans do more harm than good and do not protect against the spread of new variants.

The pandemic is not yet over and much work still needs to be done to overcome many of its effects, build greater resilience and to improve levels of international coordination and trust. This can be done through supporting measures to temporarily exempt intellectual property rights for the production of vaccines and developing the necessary regional value chains for the production of vaccines and other health products and services. There will also have to be greater support for the WHO and its key recommendations on navigating the pandemic, responding to new variants and imposing new restrictions. Unilateral measures such as travel bans have the unintended effects of discouraging transparency, evidence-based decision-making and the early communication of successfully sequenced new variants by the scientific community. Focusing on cooperation instead of the unilateral measures will help to shorten the pandemic and the severity of its effects, and would reduce the chances of new variants emerging in the first place, while also building greater resilience to deal with pandemics of the future. □

Philani Mthembu ✉

Institute for Global Dialogue, Pretoria, South Africa.

✉ e-mail: philani@igd.org.za

Published online: 31 January 2022

<https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-022-01300-2>

Competing interests

The author declares no competing interests.