

# COVID-19: TREATMENTS, CURES, RIGHTS

An explainer

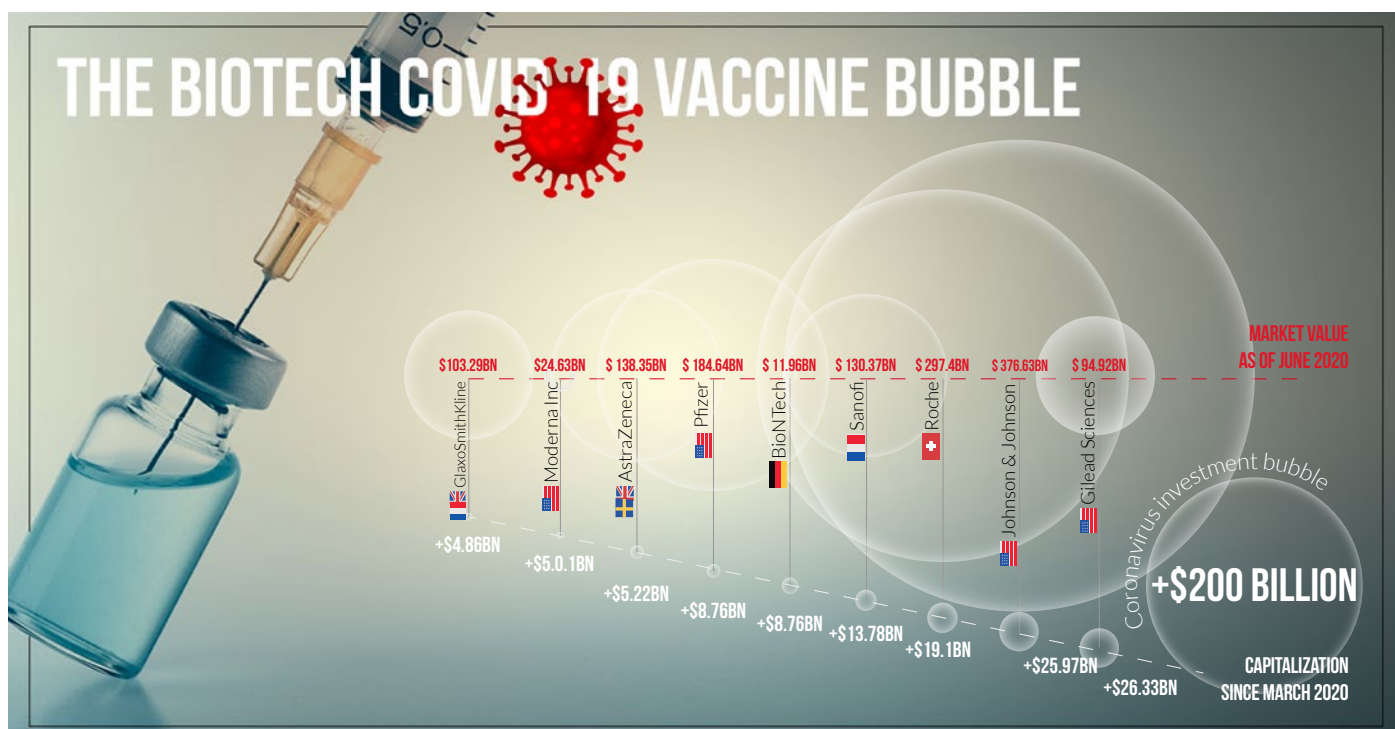
## Background

As the number of confirmed cases of Covid-19 infections continues to rise, and global fatalities reach half a million, governments are anxious to find a vaccine that could prevent the spread of the disease and end the pandemic.

Several pharmaceutical companies are said to be working to develop a cure. Being among the first to produce a safe and effective vaccine could result in billions of dollars in profits for them. Developed countries, among them those in the EU, have positioned themselves ahead of other countries to access the vaccine based on their power and ability to pay.

President Trump [made headlines recently](#) for angering his German counterparts after trying to secure priority access to a Covid-19 vaccine from CureVac, a German company. Speculators have inflated the market value of pharmaceutical companies taking part in the race in the hope of taking a share of the dividends. Consequently, the share value of the major healthcare sector companies represented in the Dow Jones index grew by [34 per cent](#) between March and May this year. American biopharmaceutical company Gilead Sciences, a frontliner in the race, saw its value [grow by](#) a staggering \$26.3 billion.

The current model dictated by market forces has two main problems. First, it makes the health of people a commodity that can be therefore exploited for profit. Second, it deepens and entrenches inequality. Millions of people around the world will be excluded from a Covid-19 vaccine based on their socio-economic status with countless human lives lost as a result.



## What our MEPs say



**Marc Botenga**  
(PTB, Belgium)

*"To beat a pandemic such as the one we're facing, we need future vaccines and treatments to be universally accessible. This is not only a matter of justice but also an issue of public health. The WHO set up a patent pool where all knowledge can be shared. The EU must ensure medicines developed with public research funds are included in this pool."*

## Depriving health by exploiting patents

At the root of the problem is the [system of patents and licenses](#) granted to pharmaceutical companies that give them exclusivity over a period of time for medicines they develop. With this comes the ability to inflate prices, exclude beneficiaries, and reap boundless profits.

This problem is not limited to a Covid-19 vaccine. Big pharmaceutical corporations have exploited patents to prevent competition for treatment of diseases such as HIV and malaria from generic drugs companies, [leading to skyrocketing prices](#) for life-saving treatments.

Corporations have [hidden or lied about](#) the real costs of R&D and production, and have not been under the obligation to reveal the true costs of vaccines. Developed countries have [consistently and repeatedly blocked efforts](#) by countries in the Global South to force through more transparency, effectively keeping these countries hostage and under constant public health emergencies.

Big pharma also exploits the patents system to extend protection way beyond normal duration. This can go as far as simply altering the colour of a drug without additional benefits for patients to maintain exclusivity rights. [More than 70 per cent](#) of the 100 best-selling drugs between 2005 and 2015 had their protection extended at least once, with almost 50 per cent receiving more than one exclusivity extension.

## Vaccines as a global public good

At the beginning of May, the European Commission launched the [Coronavirus Global Response](#), raising €9.8 billion for treatment and cure of Covid-19, promising universal access. While worthy, the initiative provides very little detail about how universal access would be achieved. Considering the EU's track record of underdelivering on its promises and its shielding of corporations, this gives rise to concern.

The Commission's [vaccines strategy](#) does not stipulate sufficient conditions for big pharmaceutical corporations likely to be the biggest recipients of the funds. As the experience with developing a [vaccine for pneumonia](#) indicates - an initiative which started off with similar lofty intentions - the failure to set even ["at-cost" prices](#) from the outset has led to price inflation and shortages.

Taxpayers have the right to demand that billions of euros of public money come with tangible guarantees that a treatment if found, is available to all.

## The view of the Left

We stand firmly for the strengthening of public health systems, the right of everyone to access cures and the universal access to treatments and medicines. Practically this would mean a need to override patents for lifesaving treatments, including a future Covid-19 vaccine, in favour of an open and democratic system such as a [compulsory patent pool](#).

Furthermore, we want 'universal access' to be comprehensive including tests, treatments and vaccines for Covid-19. The EU and donor governments from around the world must specify from the outset that any grants to R&D institutions and to businesses for the development of drugs and vaccines must be made available free and without restriction.

Healthcare access, and lifesaving drugs and treatments, must be a common public good and be protected from greed, exploitation and private interests. A complete overhaul of the intellectual property framework, that benefits pharmaceutical companies above the life and dignity of all human beings, must take priority.