

# CHALLENGING VACCINE APARTHEID. THE CASE OF TWO YOUTH GROUPS USING THEIR POWER TO ADVOCATE

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As we enter the third year of the pandemic and the new Omicron variant emerges, we recognise that the pandemic has been prolonged by corporate greed and vaccine inequity endorsed by many of our world leaders. To date, the insufficient vaccine supply to countries in the Global South has led to many preventable deaths. Rich countries have hoarded vaccine doses, leaving other countries without the protection they need and having to rely on donations. Despite public funding of vaccine research and development, pharma monopolies are still not waiving intellectual property rights for the COVID-19 vaccine, which would save lives.

Since the start of the pandemic, youth groups have been advocating loudly for vaccine equity. Universities Allied for Essential Medicines UK (UAEM UK), for example, has been offering campaigning training to students, conducting research on vaccine funding, and organised a 'free the vaccine' march in London. Respekt, having had its SRHR services in Kenya disrupted by COVID-19, organised an advocacy campaign to generate more media attention around vaccine inequity. It has produced evidence-based reports to push for vaccine equity globally. These are just two youth civil society organisations, out of many more, that have led the fight for vaccine equity. As case examples, they demonstrate the power of youth-led action during the pandemic.





UAEM's 'Free the Vaccine' march, July 2020.

**“Over 97 per cent of the research funding behind the AstraZeneca vaccine came from public and charitable sources. Despite being developed through public funds, AstraZeneca refused to share their vaccine technology and know-how with the world, which would upscale manufacturing and help end the pandemic.”**

## UAEM UK: Students Using Evidence for Advocacy

### Free the Vaccine' march, July 2020.

UAEM<sup>1</sup> was founded during the global AIDS crisis by students at Yale University. Inequitable access to medicines has been an issue long before COVID-19, but the pandemic has brought these issues to the global stage. UAEM's COVID-19 advocacy began in March 2020, when UAEM spent three months designing and delivering training to new student advocates across the United Kingdom to campaign on access to COVID-19 health technologies at their universities, nationally, and internationally. In July 2020, UAEM hosted a socially distanced 'Free the Vaccine'<sup>2</sup> march in London to highlight the public funding going into the research at London universities, and the need to ensure that any vaccine developed with this funding money was available to all.

Since then, UAEM has been tracking investment of vaccines, working with colleagues across the world to map the public funding that went into COVID-19 research<sup>3</sup> in the first wave of the pandemic, and monitoring private contributions towards COVID-19 health technologies, including the repurposed drug remdesivir and the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine.

A team of youth researchers investigated the funding of the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine in 2021. Their results found that over 97 per cent of the research funding behind this vaccine came from public and charitable sources.<sup>4</sup> Despite being developed through public funds, AstraZeneca refused to share their vaccine technology and know-how with the world, which would upscale manufacturing and help end the pandemic.

The findings of this study attracted widespread attention. The pre-print study was covered in 31 news stories worldwide, including *The Guardian*.<sup>5</sup> Following repeated Freedom of Information requests to the University of Oxford (the developer of the vaccine), the university published a redacted version of its licensing agreement with AstraZeneca. Despite public commitments by Oxford and AstraZeneca to provide the vaccine at a 0 profit cost to low-and middle-income countries, UAEM discovered that the non-profit pledge only includes the 58 countries on the GAVI<sup>6</sup> list, omitting 34 countries in need of vaccine support.<sup>7</sup> This finding highlights the limits of the pledges of individual companies and the need for more systemic solutions.

**“We need a vaccine for all and no one is safe until everyone is safe.”**



*Respekt conference, on COVID-19 and SRHR social protection challenges, August 2021.*

UAEM also partnered with colleagues across the world in multiple campaigns targeting parliamentary representatives, encouraging the UK government to join the WHO C-TAP initiative<sup>8</sup> and to support the TRIPS waiver.<sup>9</sup> The C-TAP initiative is a voluntary pool where companies and institutions can openly licence the patents, know-how, and data needed to produce COVID-19 vaccines, diagnostics and therapeutics. Sadly, despite campaigning, it remains unused. The TRIPS waiver, still being negotiated (as of October 2021), proposes the temporary suspension of certain rights related to intellectual property for COVID-19 health technologies, which proponents say will help to overcome inequitable vaccine access. The proposal remains opposed by many high-income countries despite receiving support by hundreds of developing countries.

## **RESPEKT: Vaccines as the Way Toward Resuming Services**

RESPEKT,<sup>10</sup> based in Kenya, is made up of 160 youth volunteers: 100 university students and 60 alumni mostly from the health sciences fields. Their core activities consist of raising awareness amongst teenagers on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) services available in the local facilities.

Since the first COVID-19 case was announced in Kenya in March 2020, there has been an exponential rise in the cases of teenage pregnancies and gender-based violence (GBV) countrywide.<sup>11</sup> Some regions reported a two to three times increase in the number of cases of teenage pregnancies and GBV due to the imposed nationwide lockdowns. In addition, RESPEKT activities such as SRHR workshops were postponed indefinitely due to the closure of high school and universities, restricting RESPEKT’s capacity to educate and support young people.

To address these challenges, RESPEKT youth volunteers took part in advocacy efforts to push for vaccine equity globally and increased vaccine coverage in Kenya. They advocated that vaccine equity would support the reopening of the Kenyan economy, improve access to SRHR services, and enable the successful resumption of RESPEKT workshops in target regions.

RESPEKT held a three-day conference in August 2021 focusing on pandemics and SRHR social protection challenges, research, and multi-sectoral collaboration.

One vital message that came out during the plenary sessions was the importance of equitable vaccine coverage. The conference gave special emphasis on how the COVID-19 pandemic affected the SRHR space in Kenya and proposed solutions on how to achieve vaccine equity.

Acting on this message, RESPEKT youth volunteers launched an advocacy campaign. They engaged with the media to advocate for increased vaccine coverage in Kenya in an effort to maintain the gains made in improving access to SRHR information and services. They collaborated with Public Citizen's #StopPlayingGames campaign<sup>12</sup> lobbying world leaders to end vaccine apartheid and vaccinate the world, which gained widespread attention.

In addition, RESPEKT produced evidence-based reports advocating for world leaders to adhere to their vaccine donation commitments and worked together with low- and middle-income countries towards improving COVID-19 vaccination efforts and meeting WHO vaccine coverage targets.<sup>13</sup> RESPEKT advocated for the holding off of booster shots in high- income countries until the rest of the world had vaccine coverage. The key message was that we need a vaccine for all and that no one is safe until everyone is safe.

RESPEKT's evidenced-led advocacy efforts put pressure on the Kenyan Ministry of Health to delay the administering of booster shots and instead prioritise increased vaccine coverage across Kenya.

*This spotlight chapter is part of the State of Youth Civil Society global, youth-led publication.*



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<sup>1</sup> UAEM UK is a local branch of the global student movement for access to medicines. The group focuses on using research, mobilisation, and advocacy, often in universities, to achieve equitable access to medicines.

<sup>2</sup> The Center for Artistic Activism, Youtube, (2020) 'London Carnival March for a People's Vaccine!' Accessed 26.11.21 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5qP5uo1FdEk>

<sup>3</sup> UAEM (2021) 'Public Medicines for COVID-19' accessed 26.11.21, <https://publicmeds4covid.org/>

<sup>4</sup> Cross, S., Rho, Y., Reddy, H., Pepperrell, T., Rodgers, F., Osborne, R., Eni-Olotu, A., Banerjee, R., Wimmer, S. and Keestra, S. (2021). Who funded the research behind the Oxford-AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine? Approximating the funding to the University of Oxford for the research and development of the ChAdOx vaccine technology.

<sup>5</sup> The Guardian (2021) 'Oxford/AstraZeneca Covid vaccine research 'was 97% publicly funded' Accessed 26.11.21 <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2021/apr/15/oxfordastrazeneca-covid-vaccine-research-was-97-publicly-funded>

<sup>6</sup> GAVI (2021) 'Eligibility' accessed 26.11.21 <https://www.gavi.org/types-support/sustainability/eligibility>

<sup>7</sup> The Guardian (2021) 'AstraZeneca vaccine price pledge omits some poor countries, contract shows' Accessed 22.11.21 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jun/17/astrazeneca-vaccine-price-pledge-omits-some-poor-countries-contract-shows>

<sup>8</sup> Youth Stop AIDS (2021) 'Write to your MP' Accessed 11.11.21 <https://youthstopaids.org/covid-19-missing-medicines/?fbclid=IwAR2-qjRvmdTkdsqPDV7ENDjGGtZriVun4KAHBNYrvHeR2JtZXv7mdY4XAU>

<sup>9</sup> Global Justice Now (2021) 'Suspend Covid-19 patents during the pandemic' Accessed 9.11.21 [https://act.globaljustice.org.uk/suspend-covid-19-patents-during-pandemic-2?fbclid=IwARoYPER1YEiQ8arirMjgKD14UDaxxj\\_IIXloXZnqmuJVb1emsjOmvzi1LOI](https://act.globaljustice.org.uk/suspend-covid-19-patents-during-pandemic-2?fbclid=IwARoYPER1YEiQ8arirMjgKD14UDaxxj_IIXloXZnqmuJVb1emsjOmvzi1LOI)

<sup>10</sup> Respekt is a Kenyan and Danish run social youth programme. Their programmes are curated through a peer-to-peer model aimed at promoting access to information and services in Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR).

<sup>11</sup> Plan International (2020) 'Teenage Pregnancy: Let us not busy our heads in the sand' Accessed 24.11.21 <https://plan-international.org/blog/2020/10/teenage-pregnancy-let-us-not-bury-our-heads-sand>

<sup>12</sup> Public Citizen (2021) 'World Leaders, #StopPlayingGames. Vaccine the world now' Accessed 9.11.21 <https://www.citizen.org/stopplayinggames/>

<sup>13</sup> AP News (2021) "A tale of two clinics: lines in Kenya, few takers in Atlanta" Accessed 11.12.21 <https://apnews.com/article/africa-kenya-atlanta-coronavirus-vaccine-inequities-9470346f738defb20def59c6178d1fd5>