



AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC BISHOPS CONFERENCE

Bishops Commission for Social Justice, Mission and Service

Support for increasing global access to vaccines welcomed

MEDIA RELEASE

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The Catholic Church has welcomed Australian Government support for international efforts to amend intellectual property rights to ensure more people can access life-saving COVID-19 vaccines.

Representatives of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference and other members of the Australian Fair Trade and Investment Network (AFTINET) met with Trade Minister Dan Tehan this week. They urged Minister Tehan to build support for those efforts at upcoming international meetings.

AFTINET members see a waiver on some provisions of the World Trade Organisation Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) for COVID-19 vaccines and medical products as a key strategy for ensuring equitable access to vaccines.

The Indian and South African governments have put forward the proposal for a temporary waiver of parts of the multilateral agreement on intellectual property.

Bishop Vincent Long van Nguyen OFM Conv, chair of the Bishops Commission for Social Justice, Mission and Service, said it was important for the Australian Government to speak up prominently for that initiative at the upcoming TRIPS meeting.

“Relying on voluntary agreements with companies has not produced the outcomes that vulnerable communities around the world need,” Bishop Long explained.

“Waiving intellectual property rights for the duration of the COVID-19 pandemic would overrule the 20-year monopoly on new vaccines before cheaper versions can be produced.

“At present, governments must negotiate with pharmaceutical companies for access to vaccines. These companies have limited manufacturing capacity, but they control the quantity of vaccines produced, the price and any agreements for the sharing of intellectual property to enable the local production of vaccines.

“Pope Francis, and many other religious leaders, stress that vaccines are a common good. Vaccines only achieve their purpose if everyone has access to them: no one is safe until we are all safe.”

Bishop Long said in the context of a pandemic, and of an international pharmaceutical market where a small number of firms have market power, governments have a moral responsibility to intervene to ensure just access to vaccines for all, while allowing a fair return for companies.

“Seeking unreasonable profits in the face of a catastrophic global threat to human life is unconscionable,” he said.

“It is precisely because vaccines are a common good that governments have contributed to funding their research and development. These public funds should contribute to the good of all, rather than serving the sole purpose of commercial exploitation.

“As the Vatican’s international COVID Commission says, a focus on profit alone is not ethically acceptable in the field of medicine and healthcare.

“The TRIPS waiver would enable greater access to vaccines for the whole human family, while allowing for an appropriate return – and not super-profits – for pharmaceutical companies,” Bishop Long concluded.