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Canada takes Covid vaccines from Covax scheme despite side deals

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Michael Safi and **Leyland Cecco** in Toronto

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Canada is set to receive a significant haul of vaccines over the next months through a platform designed to maximise supply to poor countries, according to a new forecast, despite reserving the most doses-per-person in the world through direct deals with pharmaceutical companies.

Chile and [New Zealand](#), which have also made controversial side deals to secure their own vaccine supplies, will also receive above-average numbers of doses, according to the interim allocation schedule released by Covax on Wednesday.

Covax, a mechanism to distribute Covid-19 doses fairly around the world, aims to deliver about 330m doses of the Oxford/AstraZeneca and Pfizer/BioNTech vaccines to 145 countries by June, volumes that it says will be enough to cover an average of 3.3% of each country's population.

Canada is entitled to receive shots under the Covax scheme, in which advance purchases by wealthy nations are used to underwrite vaccine development and subsidise doses for poorer countries. It has contributed about \$345m, half of which was to pay for its own doses.

But Ottawa has also led the world in direct deals with pharmaceutical companies to secure its own supply, reserving enough to cover approximately 9.6 doses per person, [according to Guardian analysis](#).

Global health authorities have criticised countries for making private deals that they say push up vaccine prices and represent a form of “double-dipping” - taking supplies from Covax while at the same time signing private deals that make it harder for the facility to secure doses that would be shared equitably.

Other countries that have reserved significant supplies through side deals with pharmaceutical companies, including Australia, Israel and the UK, did not elect to receive or were not allocated any vaccine from the first batch of allocations announced on Wednesday.

Canada opted to receive 1,903,200 doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine through Covax, representing about 5% of its population - above the average that other countries will receive.

Some of the vaccine doses that Canada has reserved in private deals come from candidates that are still in development, and may not be approved. But taking into account just those that have released phase 3 results, Canada still has enough reserved to vaccinate its population at least four times over.

Chile and New Zealand, who have also made extensive private deals, were also both scheduled to receive enough vaccine through Covax over the next months to cover more than 5% of their people, the data showed.

In contrast, many of the countries that were allocated Covid-19 vaccine doses on Wednesday’s list have made no direct supply deals and have no other source of vaccinations but Covax.

On Wednesday, the chief executive of Gavi, one of the organisations that is helping to administer Covax, was asked if it was helpful that many wealthy countries did not opt to take vaccines from the first batch that will be distributed. “Of course it helps,” Seth Berkley, Gavi CEO, said. “That means there are more doses available for others.”

The supply through Covax - which is not final and subject to manufacturing and logistical delays - represents a boost to the six million doses Canada was already expecting from Pfizer and Moderna before the end of March.

Despite reserving large supplies, Canada has struggled to get its vaccination program off the ground. Unlike other rich countries, it does not have fully developed domestic production capacity and is reliant on shipments from abroad.

The Canadian prime minister, Justin Trudeau, has said the country will vaccinate its population by September, but has so far managed to reach just 2.5% of people, raising doubts it will reach its target before 2022.

“Compared to other OECD countries, Canada is way down to the bottom of the pack in terms of vaccinations per hundred thousand,” said Ronald Labonté, former Canada research chair in globalisation and health equity at the University of Ottawa.

“Would I criticise Canada for having engaged in vaccine nationalism at the outset? Yes, but I would also do that with all of the countries that have since followed suit ... We’ve moved from vaccine nationalism to a vaccine race.”

Research released last week predicted that most low-income countries would not have sufficient vaccine supplies **until at least 2024**, by which time most rich and middle-income countries may have achieved close to full vaccination.

The delay will slow the global economic recovery from the crisis and increase the chance of new variants emerging that overcome immunity induced by vaccines.

Frederik Kristensen, the deputy CEO of the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations, which also runs Covax, said the announcement of the first allocations on Wednesday was a “a critical moment”.

“We are on the path to really start balancing out a global map which so far has so far shown how many low-income countries are yet to start vaccinating a single person while other wealthy countries go ahead towards mass vaccination,” he said.

Against a tide of nationalistic responses to the pandemic, Covax has successfully rallied billions of dollars in contributions, and says it is on track to deliver more than 2bn vaccine doses this year, enough to inoculate more than 20% of the populations of its 190 member countries. But the figure is thought to be an optimistic estimate, with those involved in the facility making clear that unforeseen interruptions to supply are likely, and that the full quantity of doses may take longer than scheduled to arrive.
