

To tackle COVID-19 pandemic, transparency and collaboration are vital

The COVID-19 pandemic is putting societies and their public health systems to an excruciating test, both in the Global North and Global South. The pandemic also lays bare existing shortcomings in the current research and development (R&D) model, which hinders the quest for a response to the outbreak and puts lives at further risk. One thing is certain, it has generated interest and increased scrutiny of existing practices and precipitated a re-evaluation of long-held tenets and beliefs.

With no available effective treatment for COVID-19, research for a viable vaccine or reliable therapeutic response is a priority. There is a [growing consensus](#) that, this time round, [we cannot afford](#) (both literally and figuratively) to see a situation similar to [Sofosbuvir](#) or [Imatinib](#), in which public financial support (grants, subsidies or the work of public research institutions) was critical but not reflected in the prices being charged. This effectively leaves us [paying twice](#) for medicines, once for development through our taxes and once again in the price. Lawmakers in the [United States](#) and the [European Union](#) (EU) are now demanding guarantees for **public return on public investment** and that any product developed with taxpayers' money be made **widely accessible, based on non-exclusive licensing and affordable prices**. Collaboration between governments, public institutions and pharmaceutical companies must be shaped by public interest and developed with full transparency and accountability at all stages. The need for transparency, however, does not stop at R&D and prices. It is of paramount importance that [clinical trials](#) related to the development of therapies for COVID-19 be conducted according to the highest ethical standards and transparency requirements, and registered with the relevant competent authorities.

We Already Hold the Tools to Avoid the Mistakes of the Past

The need to expedite access to certain medicines that show promise in tackling the symptoms of COVID-19 has led [some governments](#) to make moves on compulsory licensing, such as in [Israel](#) and [Canada](#). In [Germany](#), the government is looking to reform the intellectual property (IP) protection framework, with special attention paid to patents granted for pharmaceutical products. Meanwhile, in the Netherlands, the Government has offered its support to the World Health Organization for the development of a [COVID-19 patent pool](#). While research into an effective response to the virus is still at an early stage, [numerous voices](#) from different quarters are cautioning pharmaceutical companies not to repeat the mistakes of previous pandemics, like that of [HIV-AIDS in Southern Africa](#), during which business was put before of health. The remedy for a disease that has killed, or has the potential to kill, millions of people, cannot be subject to the same exclusivities, market or otherwise, that have placed other life-saving medicines beyond the reach of so many.

“Only genuine and honest collaboration between public research institutions, pharmaceutical companies and other stakeholders, like regulatory agencies and civil society, can deliver the answer to the uncertainty that currently haunts us.”

Health Action International (HAI), together with partners and allies in the access to medicines movement, has worked extensively on the need for [reform of the R&D system](#), particularly by calling for [greater transparency in public funding](#) of biomedical research and the application of a [health-oriented IP system](#). Now, more than ever, it is necessary to make sure that the product of scientific development benefits all, insist that health is put before profit, and access to life-saving medicines and vaccines is guaranteed for everyone. Everywhere.