

Omicron variant a reminder of need for vaccine equity and multilateralism: Noeleen Heyzer

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SINGAPORE - The new Omicron variant of the Covid-19 virus is a reminder of the need for vaccine equity and multilateralism, said Dr Noeleen Heyzer on Tuesday (Nov 30).

The importance of vaccine multilateralism has been a focus of the Singapore-initiated Global Governance Group of 30 countries, which has been championing the voices of small states calling for vaccine equality to close gaps in global health security, she said.

Dr Heyzer was speaking at the second of her three-part lecture series on Singapore and Multilateral Governance: Securing Our Future, which is under the Institute of Policy Studies-Nathan Lecture Series.

The social scientist, who was formerly the under-secretary-general of the United Nations, was also the 10th person to be appointed by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) as an S R Nathan Fellow for the Study of Singapore.

During a question-and-answer segment with Professor Tommy Koh, ambassador-at-large at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and IPS special adviser, Dr Heyzer was asked about the state of vaccine equity given that some countries, including Singapore, are giving booster shots to their population while other countries have inadequate supply of the vaccine.

"One has to balance realism and idealism. The idealistic situation would be if vaccines were freely available to the seven billion people but that's not the kind of world we live in," said Prof Koh, who then asked if she agreed with the World Health Organisation's condemnation of countries who have given out booster shots.

In response, Dr Heyzer said: "I personally feel that it is important for countries to protect their population. But the issue is not just about access to vaccines. It is about the production of vaccines, it is about intellectual property rights."

Instead of just looking at countries that are using it, more production of the vaccines and their distribution has to be encouraged, she said.

In her speech, Dr Heyzer said that global cooperation is key to tackling other great disruptions as well, such as climate change, the digital revolution and political upheavals.

She said: "Our world has entered a new era of uncertainty, anxiety and complexity, overlaid by four great disruptions that have burst open historical fault lines, creating great fractures in their wake.

"The handling of these disruptions combined with our shared vulnerability will be one of the greatest tests of our generation."

She said that the disruptions affect every person in his country, but the solutions will not be found country by country.

She added: "The crises we face are global, and resolving them depends on the effectiveness of multilateral governance."

Her speech delved into the topic of how the world has to rethink its approach to sustainable recovery in a Covid-19 world.

She said: "We can't quarantine the problems of the forgotten and vulnerable in our societies. Sooner or later, they become everyone's problem. Only an inclusive global public health and socio-economic response will help suppress the virus, restart our economies and (help us) recover sustainably."

She called for a three-pronged approach, starting with a large-scale, coordinated and comprehensive healthcare response that includes Covid-19 vaccines that are affordable and universally accessible.

Next, she said there is a need to protect current core capacities to safeguard lives and livelihoods, and address the devastating social and economic dimensions of the crisis, such as a focus on keeping households afloat, businesses solvent and supply chains functioning.

She also noted the importance of a recovery process that leads to more inclusive, resilient and sustainable economies and societies, as well as an international system that can protect our global commons and deliver on global public goods.

Dr Heyzer listed four priorities for the recovery process.

First, to revive economies and livelihoods by tackling inequality which has been exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic. She said: "Not only are low-income and marginalised populations more exposed to risks, but the pandemic is likely to entrench inequalities within and between countries."

Second, to bridge the digital divide, as jobs and services are increasingly based on digital literacy and access. There is also a need to understand the dark side of the cyber world and develop new norms for cyber security, she added.

Third, to make long-term sustainability a core element and protect the ecosystem of the planet, such as through striving to reach the goal of net-zero carbon emissions by 2050.

Lastly, to uphold human rights and good governance, which are central to a rule-based multilateral governance.

Dr Heyzer said: "There has been an overall breakdown in trust in major institutions worldwide due to failures to deliver public goods that people need most, to be fair and inclusive, to tackle corruption, to provide reliable information and to make a difference in people's lives.

"Building back better from the pandemic, then, needs to include respecting fundamental human rights and addressing longstanding concerns in relation to democratic space, justice and the rule of law."

She noted that there was already a growing deficit of trust between people, especially the young, and political institutions and leaders before the pandemic, but Covid-19 threw these concerns into even sharper focus.

"People need agency and voice in crises and, more than ever, governments need to be open, responsive and accountable to the people they are seeking to protect," she said.

She noted that multilateral governance has become more difficult against the backdrop of a heightened sense of insecurity and unfairness.

She said: "We need to raise the bar for economic, social, environmental and gender justice to prevent a health crisis from turning into a human tragedy. There is an urgent need to rebuild trust and to value what matters to people and the planet.

"We need to put the inclusion, protection and participation of the excluded at the heart of a renewed global social contract, like the consensus that was forged at the birth of the United Nations."

She acknowledged that there is rising interest in reinvigorating the global capacity for international cooperation and collective action.

She said: "The pandemic has also made it very clear that multilateralism, not nationalism, is the answer for recovery and to build back better."