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Does the World Need Global Vax Passport?

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Governments around the world are exploring the potential benefits of using an 'vaccine passports' as a way to reopening the economy by identifying and permitting only those who are protected against COVID-19

As the aftermath of the pandemic continues to pummel international trade and businesses across sectors, a concerted attempt is on to develop and deploy potential technologies such as digital and biometric passports. Travel corridors are slowly opening for vaccinated individuals with the prospect of the 'digital vaccine certificate/passport' as an integral part of international travel. Digital vaccine tracking system, the "vaccine passport" is a form of e-certificate that provides proof of vaccination and COVID-19 test results. Yet, they require international or national coordination on the best practices to implement cross-border vaccine passes.

While the world awaits herd immunity, millions of vaccinated individuals across the world are eagerly anticipating trade and operational plans at the vaccination horizons. Border checkpoints are reviving vigilance around the globe and countries are exploring novel methodologies to revive international travel, an essential social and business component at present

While the COVID-19 vaccines are being rolled out around the world and testing is becoming customary for international travel, many tech firms and healthcare organizations are collaborating to ensure access to a secure, digital record of their Covid-19 vaccination status. Several companies and technology groups have developed smartphone apps or systems for individuals to upload details of their COVID-19 tests and vaccinations and thereby create digital credentials permitting entry to a venue, university, workplace, hotels, public transport, tourist destinations, or traveling across borders.

The World Health Organisation is also working on a Smart Vaccination Certificate, which will provide guidelines and standards for every digital vaccine passport. A number of agencies including UNICEF, ITU, and the European Commission are contributing along with WHO to this initiative. The finalized specifications and standards for digital vaccination certificates will be architected for a link to national and cross-border digital systems.

The apparent technical issues and rising ethical concerns about COVID infection and risk stratification based on immunological status involve varied considerations. WHO has already alerted around the concerns associated with the

ethical acceptability of immunity certification. If a standardized and widely accepted pass emerges, it will eliminate the need to carry physical documentation. Granting credibility to the online certification can make travel equitable, safe, inclusive, and convenient. Yet, there are concerns and considerations and a few are listed below.

Implementation and accuracy concerns:

- Vaccination doesn't prevent viral infection as passes indicating 'negative test' results are not valid for a long period. Negative test results for coronavirus should be validated only for tests taken within 72 hours prior to the traveler's departure.
- WHO has caution on rapid antigen tests performed at most airlines which may be "less appropriate" than molecular PCR tests for enabling international travel. Attention to test error is essential.
- The percentage of the efficacy of a particular vaccines brand in preventing transmission is still debatable. Vaccinated individuals are still being able to catch and spread the disease.
- Global vaccine supply is limited to be dependent on vaccine passport alone for traveling until a long period
- Should be built on a platform of interoperable technologies allowing different systems to work together across country boundaries
- Require fundamentally secured and tamper-proof measures across the verification system with strong access control and thus safeguarding cyberattacks
- It is also essential to adopt vaccine passports which are simplest, cheapest, most authoritative, scalable, fraud-resistant, and yet be extremely accurate with scientific grounds

Safety and privacy concerns:

- Ensure protection from non-consensual identification, confidentiality breach, and data abuse through tougher government policies on vaccination testifying electronic systems or mobile apps
- Secured linking of the test results to biometric identifiers or a protected digital identity can be enabled to minimize fraudulent health and vaccine certificates
- Legal and regulatory mechanisms should be in place to limit data access to legitimate governmental authorities and third parties only up to the intended purpose
- Incentives and counterfeits: The perceived benefits of immune certificates could also result in an illicit market for counterfeit certificates. Only authorized bodies should certify from licensed laboratories and certificates to be issued by legal health authorities only.

Ethical and Equality concerns.

- Vaccinating the global population is a prolonged process due to inequality in vaccine distribution. Rich nations have secured more doses and many in poor nations are yet to get their first jab. This might create a situation where only wealthy countries who have secured sufficient vaccines might have access to travel and lower-income nations will lose out on the travel advantage.
- Potential issues could arise around the younger generation who would be last in line to be vaccinated.
- Data collection, processing, and retention should be kept to the minimum necessary applications to achieve public health and socioeconomic objectives alone
- Attention needed towards certifying those who cannot be vaccinated for specific reasons or health concerns (pregnant, breastfeeding, immunosuppressed, undergoing specific drug therapy, and so on)

To read more on **Asia-Pacific efforts in vaccine passport** click **Here**