

**International challenges and public goods responses in turbulent times:
The experience of Covid-19 vaccines in the Peruvian government**

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Introduction

Thanks to the organizers of the Borah Symposium, established in honor and memory of former senator William Borah, a dedicated promotor of international peace. His vision and passion are now as relevant as of when he first promoted it, nearly a century ago.

I would like to cover briefly a range of issues that brings the question of international peace, human rights, equity and fairness, starting first with an assessment of the current times we are living in, focusing next on the challenges that international arrangements face to maintain a peaceful and fruitful coexistence between our increasingly interconnected and bewildered societies, continuing my intervention with an outline of what a global and international public goods approach could contribute to improve those arrangements, to finish with an account of how we had to deal in Peru with the shortcomings of an international organizations system that could not provide and deliver vaccines against the Covid-19 virus and left us to our own devices to face the ravages of the pandemic.

A change of epoch

We are now living a “change of epoch” not an “epoch of changes” in all aspects of human activities. We have not experienced such a situation since the end of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance when humanity’s perceptions and conception of the world changed in fundamental ways. As the result of the scientific revolution, advances in technology and prodigious innovations, the last five hundred years have seen a fundamental shift in the ways we relate to the world around us and to each other. Following German philosopher Hans Jonas, I have explored how the “Baconian program” of dominating nature through understanding to improve the human condition unfolded since the early sixteenth century, when it was implicitly formulated by Sir Francis Bacon, then was deliberately deployed starting in the mid-nineteenth century, when the expansion of international capitalism mobilized the Baconian program to generate an explosion of scientific knowledge, technological advances and innovations that improved human life everywhere, albeit at different paces and to different extents.

The extraordinary success of the Baconian program ended up undermining its own foundations. Its impact on nature and society has been pervasive but took place without safeguards that could have guided its pervasive application and influence without the negative consequences that were not anticipated but are now for us to see everywhere. “Domination of nature through understanding” became the reckless exploitation of natural resources, without any regard for preserving the regenerative capacity of ecosystems that support human life (our species now faces the once unthought possibility of extinction!). It also created new information technologies that altered the patterns of human interaction in ways that outpaced our capacity to develop values and norms to organize and regulate them, in such ways to enhance its positive features and protect us from their harmful effects.

The result is now for all of us to see: uncertainty, insecurity, lack of trust everywhere, at all times. Human interactions, both at the individual and collective levels, are now fraught with polarization, resentment, mutual contempt, disregard of the other, lack of dialogue, waning of empathy, breakdown of solidarity. “No sabemos lo que nos pasa, y eso es lo que nos pasa” — “We don’t know what is happening to us, and that is what is happening to us”—sentenced Spanish philosopher Ortega y Gasset seven decades ago, anticipating our current condition. In my view, we are experiencing the twilight of Bacon’s age, his program needs to be rethought, reformulated, and vastly improved to deal with the challenges that its own success has created.

Shortcomings (obsolescence?) of current international institutional arrangements

Our efforts to cope with the transition to a post-Baconian age require collective efforts, joint undertakings. Do we have the institutional structure and arrangements at the international level to begin such a daunting and crucial task for the survival of our species in the coming decade? Clearly not.

Current international institutions were created in the aftermath of World War II to maintain international peace and security, and particularly to forestall any possible nuclear threat, and have served their purpose well during the time the triumph of the Baconian program —prior to its twilight— generated a sense of global optimism in the future of humanity, even at times when the Cold War appeared to threaten our prospects. The United Nations has contributed to save our species from nuclear annihilation, regional bodies have also maintained peace and promoted trade and other joint undertakings, bilateral cooperation agencies have assisted many medium- and low-income countries to improve the quality of life of their populations, and the International Monetary Fund and its regional counterparts have largely managed to maintain economic and financial stability

In addition, the perhaps most successful of the international institutional innovations of the 20th century —the Multilateral Development Banks (first imagined by Lord Keynes in 1919 and created 35 years later)— were able to mobilize thousands of millions of dollars to improve human wellbeing, promote investment and offer new development prospects for hundreds of millions of people.

Yet, all these institutions and organizations are now experiencing great stress and facing huge challenges. They need to be updated, revamped, and complemented with a new generation of international institutions that could be better equipped to deal with the challenges that are accompanying the transition to a new epoch, what I have tried to describe as the post-Baconian age.

An interesting and promising approach, worth exploring in detail by intellectual and political leaders, is associated with the idea of providing and financing a range of global and international public goods that could significantly contribute to preserve our species and improve the human condition.

Global and international public goods

Public goods in economic theory —a concept first introduced in this field by Paul Samuelson in 1954— are defined as those that are characterized by *non-rivalry*, in the sense

that its consumption or use by one person does not prevent its enjoyment by another person, and *non-excludability*, in the sense that it is not possible to impede anyone from enjoying it. In addition, they are characterized by the possibility of *free riding*, which means that even those who do not contribute to its provision can enjoy it, and *positive or negative externalities*, which refer to the collateral effects and second-order consequences that their enjoyment have on those unrelated to the provision or consumption of the public good, which are particularly relevant at the international level.

Examples are, peace, security, clean air, biodiversity conservation, public health, macroeconomic stability, and similar issues. “Public good” is an ideal concept, it is something that can be approached but not fully grasped, which has led to define pure (ideal) and impure (practical) public goods.

Public goods, and particularly *global and international public goods*, do not exist on their own, they are the product of deliberate human action. They are the result of political commitments, knowledge advances, decisions on institutional and organizational arrangements, and of provisions for their financing, all of which constitute an *international public goods delivery system*.

Challenges like the pandemic clearly highlight and showcase the importance of designing and putting in place new institutional arrangements for the provision and financing of international public goods.

The experience of the COVAX facility, created to acquire, provide, and distribute vaccines to middle- and low-income countries clearly shows the need for, and the limitations of, recent initiatives to arrange for the creation of international public goods delivery system

Covid-19 vaccines as an international public good and the limitations of the COVAX facility

From the beginning of the pandemic in early 2020 it became clear that the development and production of vaccines was the best way of arresting the spread of the virus and protecting life. Efforts were made, and succeeded spectacularly, to develop effective vaccines in record time, though these were concentrated in a handful of high-income nations that had the scientific, technological and production facilities to undertake this task. By the end of 2020 there were three vaccines ready for distribution and application, and during 2021 several others were added to the anti-Covid-19 arsenal.

There remained the issue of how to distribute and apply these vaccines. Which criteria and principles should govern their allocation and use? Wealth or need? Should those high-income countries that had the financial, scientific, technological, and productive capacity to develop the vaccine be the only ones to get access to it? Were the lives of hundreds of millions of people in middle- and low-income countries worth less than those in high-income countries? Right from the beginning efforts were made to transform the vaccine into an international public good, accessible to all the people in the world, regardless of the income level of their countries.

This led to the creation of the COVAX facility, a multi-institutional initiative that put together the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunization (GAVI), the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations (CEPI), the World Health Organization (WHO), with the support of some governments and private foundations. Its function was to acquire through purchases

and donations enough vaccines to provide initially up to twenty percent of the vaccines needed by middle-income countries, which would pay a relatively favorable price per dose, and low-income countries, which would receive the vaccines as donations.

Unfortunately, the COVAX facility did not access the number of Covid-19 doses of vaccines to achieve its aim. High-income countries, and the pharmaceutical corporations based in them, kept most of the vaccines for themselves and made only small amounts available to the COVAX facility. For example, in the case of Peru, despite having signed an agreement with the facility for 13.2 million doses in September 2020, by the time the Transition and Emergency Government, which ended on July 28, 2021, had received only 1.6 million. Moreover, after reaching an agreement with the COVAX facility, countries did not know which laboratory would deliver the vaccines, when and in which amounts, and required an additional negotiation to set the terms for the purchase of doses from each laboratory. In practice, when the Transition and Emergency Government began on November 19, 2020, we had no firm agreement to provide vaccines.

We had to try for a second-best solution. To make sure that even if the vaccine was not an international public good, we would at least make it a *national public good*. This meant ensuring access to everybody in the target population (people over 18 years of old), irrespective of their economic or social condition, place of residence and any other characteristic. In doing so, we confronted many demands for special treatment and priority in receiving the vaccine, vociferous requests by private sector enterprises to purchase the vaccine directly and apply it to their workers and their families, claims of special situations, and so on.

We decided to make the vaccine *non-rivalrous* by acquiring as many doses as possible, ensuring that all the target population would get vaccinated as quickly as possible, to make it *non-excludable*, by empowering an Ethics Committee of independent experts to define the sequence of target groups to receive the vaccine considering only vulnerability, need and contribution to combatting the pandemic, and to make sure it had *positive externalities* by accompanying the vaccination process with other measures to protect the population from the pandemic and maintain social stability.

Concluding remarks

The provision of vaccines to fight the pandemic in Peru indicates that it is possible, to a certain extent, to ameliorate the plight of those affected by the virus by substituting national initiatives within the framework of the provision of national public goods, but that for many middle- and low-income countries this may not be workable. We need to devise better and more effective institutional arrangements for this purpose. I have used the example of vaccines, but the challenges mentioned in the first part of this address suggests that there are many areas that require, and urgently demand, joint initiatives to arrange for the provision of global and international public goods. Climate change, peace and security, biodiversity conservation, preservation of the ecosystems that support human life, and macroeconomic stability are among the many global issues that require innovative initiatives to mobilize international collective action.

Thank you and I am ready to answer your questions and react to your comments.