

# Social scientist stresses need for vaccine equity, multilateralism

**Goh Yan Han**

The new Omicron variant of the virus that causes Covid-19 is a reminder of the need for vaccine equity and multilateralism, said Dr Noeleen Heyzer on Tuesday.

The importance of vaccine multilateralism has been a focus of the Singapore-initiated Global Governance Group (3G) 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 in 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 a United Nations under-secretary-general, is the 10th person appointed by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) as an S R Nathan Fellow for the Study of Singapore.

During a dialogue segment with IPS' special adviser, Ambassador-at-Large Tommy Koh, Dr Heyzer was asked about the state of vaccine equity given that some countries, including Singapore, are giv-

ing booster shots to their population while other countries have an inadequate supply of the vaccine.

Professor Koh said: "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."

He then asked if Dr Heyzer agreed with the World Health Organisation's condemnation of countries who have given booster shots.

She 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 have to be encouraged, she said.

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

"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," she said.



Dr Noeleen Heyzer speaking at a dialogue segment with Institute of Policy Studies' special adviser, Ambassador-at-Large Tommy Koh, during the second of her three-part lecture series on Tuesday. PHOTO: INSTITUTE OF POLICY STUDIES

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

Her speech delved into the topic of how the world has to rethink its approach to sustainable recovery. "Only an inclusive global public health and socio-economic response will help suppress the virus,

restart our economies and (help us) recover sustainably," she said.

She called for a large-scale, coordinated and comprehensive health-care response that includes Covid-19 vaccines that are affordable and universally accessible.

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

Dr Heyzer listed four priorities for the recovery process: to revive economies and livelihoods by tackling inequality; to bridge the digital divide; to focus on long-term sustainability such as striving to reach the goal of net zero carbon emissions by 2050; and to uphold human rights and good governance.

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 has thrown 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 is now more difficult against the backdrop of a heightened sense of insecurity and unfairness.

"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 said.

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

gyanhan@sph.com.sg