



Bjorn Hojgaard

Why Hong Kong should give excess Covid-19 vaccines to seafarers

- Hundreds of thousands of seafarers have been stranded at sea or marooned at home, putting great stress on their well-being and straining global supply chains
- Hong Kong is in the unique position of having extra vaccines and being able to lead a global humanitarian effort to aid these maritime heroes



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A health worker directs seafarers and port workers during a Covid-19 vaccine programme for Malaysian frontline workers in Port Klang, Malaysia, on June 25. Photo: Bloomberg

Many of us in Hong Kong go about our lives unaware of our dependence on an invisible workforce for the delivery of our daily necessities and conveniences. From the food on our table and life-saving medicines to fuel, cars, electronic devices and clothing, the list is endless.

All that could be taken away in a moment if not for the 1.7 million seafarers working on board the world's 56,000 merchant vessels. It will come as even more of a shock to know that since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, the full provision of the necessities has been far from certain and remains a matter of chance to this day.

The global supply chains that help feed, clothe and fuel us have not been under more strain since World War II, and the reason is simple. As the pandemic spread across the world and nations locked down for protection, seafarers became locked out and were unable to travel freely, thus severely inhibiting crew relief and repatriation operations.

At the height of the crisis, some 400,000 seafarers were stranded on board their vessels far beyond their contracts – in some cases, for as long as 18 months. A similar number have been marooned at home, out of contract and unable to earn a living.

This humanitarian crisis at sea and ashore has had a catastrophic impact on seafarers' physical, economic and psychological well-being, thereby putting global supply chains and maritime safety at risk.

The situation remains critical, but thankfully there now appears to be a way out through vaccinations. However, many seafarers are from India and the Philippines, where vaccines are in short supply. By contrast, Hong Kong is in the envious position of having more vaccine supply than demand.

According to the Hong Kong government, there are restrictions on selling or donating its vaccines to other places owing to provisions in the purchase agreements. Rather than letting such a valuable resource go to waste, the government has an opportunity to put those excess vaccines to good use before they expire by offering them to international seafarers calling on Hong Kong.

As an international financial centre and home to one of the world's busiest airports and container ports, Hong Kong has long touted itself as a world city in Asia. What better way to truly exemplify this vision than to offer a much-needed lifeline in the region to the world's heroes at sea?

For the past several weeks, various ports in the United States have been offering foreign seafarers access to vaccines on board or ashore without compromising local health and safety.

Some ports in Europe are beginning to follow suit. But in Asia, where some 40 per cent of the world's goods are loaded and 60 per cent unloaded, there has been little progress to date.

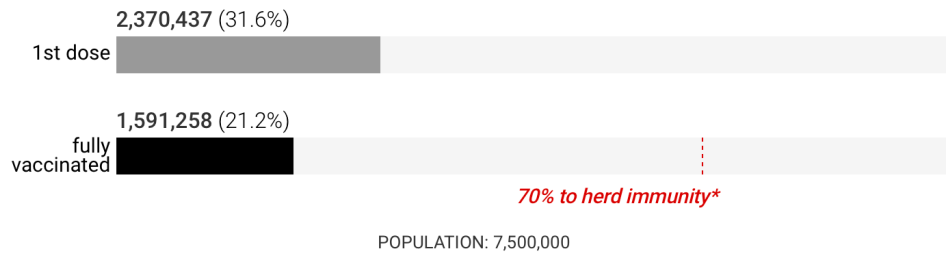
Once again, Hong Kong could take the lead in helping to resolve this global humanitarian crisis. Besides doing the right thing for the seafarers and earning the goodwill of the global community, it would also cement Hong Kong's status as a leading international maritime centre with heart.

In conducting such an exercise, the health and safety of the community must of course be the top priority. In that regard, Hong Kong has gained invaluable experience in the safe and effective roll-out of a mass vaccination scheme earlier this year.

For additional guidance, the authorities may also consult the International Chamber of Shipping's "Coronavirus (Covid-19) Roadmap for Vaccination of International Seafarers". In terms of costs, the government can rest assured that Hong Kong's shipping community would be more than willing to absorb the administrative costs of a vaccination campaign for foreign seafarers.

Vaccinated Hong Kong population

Number of people who have been vaccinated



* Based on assessment by government public health advisers

Source: Hong Kong government

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Admittedly, the government has shown a willingness to offer vaccines to a small segment of foreign seafarers – those working on board [cruise ships serving Hong Kong](#) – for the understandable reason that cruise ships carry people.

But we must not lose sight of the fact that the world's merchant fleet, which carries more than 80 per cent of global trade goods by volume, is also serving Hong Kong people. It can only be hoped, therefore, that the government will extend the same courtesy to seafarers on board commercial vessels.

The government must act quickly. The usefulness of the excess vaccine stockpile will expire soon. There is no time to waste.

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