

Seven Reasons Why a Vaccine Passport (Pass, Certificate or Whatever They Want to Call It) Should Give Us Pause for Thought

As the use of vaccine passports snowballs around the world, concerns about their potential reach and implications are growing.

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Vaccine passports (or passes or certificates) are being rushed through around the world, including in places where most people have not even been able to get a vaccine yet. They are being touted as a way of jump-starting the global economy by providing a means for people to prove their vaccinated status, allowing them to travel, shop, go to the gym, attend sporting and cultural events and conduct other indoor activities. Countries like Israel, Saudi Arabia, and Singapore have already introduced vaccine passports in the last couple of months.

Of course, the use of the word “passport” is deceptive. “Passport” implies a document endorsed by a state that establishes citizenship and guarantees diplomatic protection. A traditional passport does not require the bearer to participate in a vaccine program, although immunity certificates have existed for diseases such as Yellow Fever. Another difference is that a vaccine passport is likely to come in the form of a digital document. The potential scope of its application is also far broader than that of a normal passport. It could be required not only to establish identity and vaccine status at national borders but also to travel, access public buildings and basic services within one’s own country of residence.

In countries that already have an established national health service, such as the UK and Israel, the vaccine passport has been mandated at state level. In the US tech and health-care companies are firmly in the driving seat. At least 17 alternative programs are currently under development. As for the EU, it has [proposed](#) issuing “digital green certificates” that would allow EU residents to travel freely across the 27-nation bloc by the summer as long as they have been vaccinated, tested negative for COVID-19 or recovered from the disease. It’s worth noting that the EU [has been studying](#) the feasibility of creating a common EU vaccination card since early 2019.

International Initiatives

There are also initiatives taking place internationally such as the Smart Vaccination

Certificate Working Group, whose partners include WHO, UNICEF, ITU and the European Commission. The group “is focused on establishing key specifications, standards and a trust framework for a digital vaccination certificate to facilitate implementation of effective and interoperable digital solutions that support COVID-19 vaccine delivery and monitoring, with intended applicability to other vaccines.”

Another initiative is the CommonPass digital health app being developed by the Commons Project Foundation (CPJ), which was founded by the Rockefeller Foundation and is supported by the World Economic Forum. The CommonPass is both a framework and an app that “will allow individuals to access their lab results and vaccination records, and consent to have that information used to validate their COVID status without revealing any other underlying personal health information.”

Then there’s ID2020, a nongovernmental organization that advocates for digital IDs for the billion undocumented people worldwide and under-served groups like refugees. In 2019, ID2020 launched a new digital identity program in collaboration with the [government of Bangladesh](#) and the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunization (GAVI). It is now involved in the [Good Health Pass Collaborative](#), “an open, inclusive, cross-sector initiative, bringing together leading companies and organizations from the technology, health, and travel sectors”.

Pause for Thought

Some of these initiatives are already being piloted by companies, including airlines, and local or regional authorities. All Nippon Airways [has started](#) a test of the CommonPass on its flights from Tokyo Haneda to New York. Last week New York unveiled its Excelsior pass, which is based on technology from IBM. Other states are likely to follow suit. France has also [just completed](#) a month-long trial of a health passport app for Air France passengers travelling to Martinique and Guadeloupe.

The speed at which these initiatives are being rushed out should give pause for thought. Just as with contact tracing apps, the rollout is haphazard and rife with conflicts of interest. The technology is unproven and the privacy issues are glaring. Below are seven reasons why I believe vaccine passports should worry us. Perhaps you can think of more.

1. We still don’t know how effective or safe the vaccines are. The ostensible goal behind the vaccine passport is to provide proof that a person has taken an officially approved vaccine and therefore poses less of a contagion risk. Yet we still don’t know just how effective or safe each vaccine is. Naturally, the efficacy levels of each vaccine vary. As WHO itself [concedes](#), there is still uncertainty over whether inoculation actually prevents transmission of the virus.

We also have no idea how long the immunity — partial or otherwise — provided by each vaccine lasts. What’s more, some of the vaccines appear to have reduced efficacy against some variants, including the B.1.351 strain (originally identified in South Africa).

It’s not just the potential lack of efficacy that should have us worried. There are also big safety concerns. Numerous adverse reactions have already been reported around the world. In the case of the vaccines developed by [AstraZeneca](#) and [Johnson & Johnson](#), concerns about blood clotting side effects have led some countries to restrict or even suspend their use.

In the US, the latest VAERs data released on April 12 [showed](#) over 46,000 reports of adverse events following COVID vaccines. Women have been disproportionately affected, [accounting for](#) 77% of cases. Many are experiencing abnormal menstruation, raising fears that the vaccines could even affect fertility.

2. *Vaccine geopolitics.* To all intents and purposes the West is already locked in a new cold war with China and Russia. Tensions are escalating on an almost daily basis. Against such a backdrop, it's hardly beyond the realms of possibility that at some point down the line countries or companies in the West will refuse to recognise vaccines certificates that are based on Russian or Chinese vaccines, and vice versa. The justifications for doing so will grow as bad news continues to emerge about the efficacy and safety of vaccines.

Over the past weekend Western news sources [reported](#) that George Fu Gao, director of the Chinese Center for Disease Prevention and Control, had publicly acknowledged that Chinese-made vaccines currently offer low efficacy against the virus. "We will solve the issue that current vaccines do not have very high protection rates," he said, adding that adjusting the dosage or sequential immunisation and mixing vaccines might boost efficacy.

Since then China has backtracked on the comments. But the episode nonetheless raises serious questions for those nations relying heavily on the Chinese jab, including many in Latin America. If Chinese vaccines are not as effective as originally thought, it's perfectly feasible that some countries in the West will refuse to acknowledge vaccine passes sporting the name of a Chinese vaccine. As such, rather than freeing up global travel, vaccine passports could end up erecting new barriers.

3. *The potential for mission creep.* To begin with, SMART Health Cards are likely to include a person's complete name, gender, birth date, mobile phone number, and email address in addition to vaccination information. But although advertised as digital vaccination records, they are clearly intended to be used for much more. Public information on the protocol [notes](#) that SMART Health Cards are "building blocks that can be used across health care," including managing a complete immunization record that goes far beyond COVID-19 vaccines, sharing data with public-health agencies, and communication with health-care providers.

The framework is unlikely to be limited to health-care information. The use of the term "digital wallet", both by the Vaccine Collective Initiative and [IBM](#), to refer to their different digital health passes suggests that economic activity could become an integral part of the frameworks' functions. The developer of the Vaccine Collective Initiative's SMART Health Cards framework at Microsoft Health, Josh C. Mandel, [hinted](#) in a recent YouTube presentation that SMART Health Cards could soon be used as IDs for commercial activity, such as renting a car.

That this is all happening as central banks around the world are busily laying the foundations for central bank digital currencies, or CBDCs as they've come to be known, raises the specter of digital vaccine passports being used as a vehicle for the creation of a purely digital currency system to replace physical coins and notes. That's not to say this will happen but it is a possibility. If the vaccine passport does become a digital currency wallet and cash is eliminated, opting out will be much harder. And opting in will leave us subject to levels of surveillance and control that were heretofore unthinkable.

4. *Creating a two-tier society/world.* Since its very inception Covid-19 has been a pandemic

of inequality. This is particularly true in Israel, which was already a two-tier society long before Covid came along. It recently became the first country to launch a nationwide vaccine passport scheme, the so-called Green Pass. But its intended target is Israelis, not Palestinians. According to *The Guardian*, just over 4% of the 5 million Palestinians living in the occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip [have so far received vaccines](#). Active Covid cases are back near historic highs while in the rest of Israel they are at their lowest level since last June.

Vaccine passports could end up exacerbating social divisions wherever they are used. Those who have access to vaccines can return to some semblance of normal life while those who don't find themselves left even further out in the cold. This will happen not just within countries but between countries. As the Israeli economy reopens, Palestinians face arguably even more restrictions on their movement and activities than before Covid. But it's not just Palestinians who are finding themselves being treated as second class citizens; so too are Israelis who refuse to take the vaccine, on religious, ethical or health grounds. Without Green Passes, they are unable to enter certain places or participate in certain activities.

Over time, as life gets more difficult for these people, the pressure to get the jab will grow. At least that's what vaccine passport proponents like Joan Costa-Font of the London School of Economics [are hoping](#).

“Vaccine passports can be used as an incentive to change behavior. They not only provide some direct benefits, but they signal what society expects from individuals. They exemplify a social norm that individuals are expected to comply with.”

But coercing people to take the vaccine could have the opposite effect, [warns](#) an opinion piece in the BMJ:

All in all, there are reasons to conclude that vaccine passports for basic activities may actually undermine vaccine rollout by disincentivising the very populations who most need incentivising. Closer inspection of the Israeli “green pass” scheme serves to reinforce this message. The evidence for passes increasing vaccination uptake is weak, while suspicions of compulsion and reports of people barred from workplaces for not being vaccinated have “resulted in antagonism and increased distrust among individuals who were already concerned about infringement on citizens’ rights.”

5. Loss of bodily autonomy and integrity. Forcing an experimental vaccine upon someone who doesn't want it clearly contravenes their right to bodily autonomy and integrity. According to the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, “everyone has the right to respect for his or her physical and mental integrity. In the fields of medicine and biology, the following must be respected in particular: the free and informed consent of the person concerned, according to the procedures laid down by law.”

If bodily autonomy and integrity are indeed fundamental human rights, then the issuance of COVID vaccine passports should hinge on the informed consent of the individual and *not* mandatory adoption, as has been proposed in France, or coercion (and yes, denying people access to basic services is a form of coercion). This is particularly true in the case of vaccines that are approved merely on an emergency use basis.

6. *Most governments and tech giants have already shown they cannot be trusted with our most valuable data.* Vaccine passports raise huge privacy concerns. Data-hungry companies like Microsoft, a member of the Vaccine Credential Initiative, will be given new opportunities to track our daily movements and activities and share that data with third parties. There are also major concerns about data security. If recent history has taught us anything, it is that no data — no matter how private or precious — is completely secure.

A vaccine certificate is likely to include our most precious data of all: our biometric data. And it is unlikely to be safe. As Peter Yapp, ex-deputy director of UK GCHQ's National Cyber Security Centre (NCSC) recently [warned](#), building yet another centralised database to store even more of our personal data would create even more opportunity for hackers and cyber criminal organizations to plunder our data:

“Centralised databases means you’re putting a lot of data in one place so it becomes an attractive target for hackers and the like so it’s like a honeypot - it attracts people in and they’re going to have a go because there is so much data... As a software engineer, I know all software has bugs. Bugs create security vulnerabilities, that’s why it’s a terrible idea to gather together so much data of such importance in one place. This is one more nail in the coffin in the idea of Covid certification.”

7. *Whatever the politicians might say, a vaccine certificate will be permanent.* When the vaccine certificate debate reached fever pitch in the UK last week the Conservative Party tried to assuage voter fears by insisting that the certificate would be temporary.

“It will be time limited and I think the duration of the scheme will be measured in months,” one unnamed insider [said](#). “The party will not wear any longer.”

This is from the same government that publicly insisted for months that it was not even considering vaccine certificates while in private it was examining how they could be used. After going to all the trouble and expenditure to create a digital ID system whose applications and uses can be expanded at ease, there’s no way in the world that the UK government is going to just hand it all back a few months later. As history has taught us time and again, whenever governments reward themselves new temporary powers, they usually find it painfully hard to relinquish them. Such will no doubt be the case with the vaccine passport, pass, certificate or whatever they want to call it.

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