By Tom Ozimek
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WHO Adopts European-Style COVID-19 Vaccine Passports as Part of New Global Digital Health Certificate

Minister of State to the Federal Chancellor and Federal Government Commissioner for Digitisation, Dorothee Baer shows an ID wallet on display on the screen of a mobile phone at reception of the Steigenberger Hotel on May 17, 2021 in Berlin, Germany. (Filip Singer-Pool/Getty Images)

The World Health Organization (WHO) said it will take up the European Union's digital COVID-19 vaccine passport framework as part of a new global network of digital health certificates.

The WHO said in a [June 5 statement](#) that it had entered into a "landmark digital health partnership" with the European Commission (EC), the European Union's executive body.

As part of this new joint venture, Europe's existing framework of digital vaccine passports will serve as the first building block of a global network of digital health products.

Dubbed the Global Digital Health Certification Network, the new vaccine passport framework has already drawn criticism, with Australian senator Alex Antic [saying in a statement](#) that the move is "just another conspiracy theory coming true."

Vaccine passports—and various other forms of digital identity schemes—[have been criticized](#) as an invasion of privacy and as having the potential to enable governments and corporations to coerce human behavior by, for instance, denying access to infrastructure or services.

The WHO said in a statement that, as part of the new initiative, it will "take up the European Union (EU) system of digital COVID-19 certification to establish a global system that will help facilitate global mobility and protect citizens across the world from on-going and future health threats."

The EU's digital COVID-19 vaccine certificate entered into force in July 2021, with over 2.3 billion certificates issued.

As the pandemic has waned, the use of vaccine passports has seen limited use of late—and it has declined further since the WHO [recently declared](#) an end to COVID-19 as a global public health emergency.

While the EU Digital COVID Certificate Regulation is [set to expire](#) at the end of June 2023, the WHO sees potential in the bloc's digital vaccine passport framework for additional use cases beyond COVID-19, such as by digitizing the International Certificate of Vaccination or Prophylaxis.

Critics have denounced vaccine passports as discriminatory for facilitating denial of access to public services to the unvaccinated or paving the way for more intrusive health-based surveillance.

'Worrying Development'?

The new global vaccine passport initiative follows a December 2022 agreement signed by WHO Director-General Dr. Tedros Ghebreyesus and European Commission for Health and Food Safety Stella Kyriakides, meant to bolster EU–WHO collaboration on a wide range of digital health products.

"Today is a new chapter in global cooperation on digital health," Kyriakides said in a [statement on social media](#).

"It will help to place WHO at the centre of our global health architecture," she added.

Ghebreyesus [said in a statement](#) that, "building on the EU's highly successful digital certification network, WHO aims to offer all WHO Member States access to an open-source digital health tool."

"New digital health products in development aim to help people everywhere receive quality health services quickly and more effectively," he added.

The announcement of the global vaccine passport initiative drew a critical response from Dutch politician Rob Roos, a member of the European Parliament, who called it a "worrying development."

"The #Coronapas is a discriminatory instrument that has only created a false sense of safety," Roos said in a [post on Twitter](#).

Roos also expressed concern that the new initiative was being driven forward by the WHO, which is not a governmental organization accountable to voters.

"We cannot handover national power to a private funded institute without any democratic legitimacy," he said in an [earlier post](#) that took a dim view of the so-

called global pandemic treaty, a separate but related proposal that [is being negotiated](#) within the WHO's Intergovernmental Negotiating Body.

While the global pandemic treaty is in its early stages and is still far from ratification, [concerns have been raised](#) that the ["legally binding" treaty](#) would give the WHO too much sway over sovereign countries' health policies.

The push for a global system of standardized digital health certificates has been around for some time.

G-20 Push for Global Vaccine Passports

In November 2022, the leaders of the Group of 20 (G-20) nations issued a joint declaration promoting a global standard on proof of vaccination for international travel and calling for the establishment of "global digital health networks" that build on existing COVID-19 vaccine passport schemes.

The [joint statement](#) came at the conclusion of the G-20 summit held in Indonesia, which followed recommendations from Indonesia's Minister of Health Budi Gunadi Sadikin ahead of the summit.

"Let's have a digital health certificate acknowledged by WHO—if you have been vaccinated or tested properly, then you can move around," [Sadikin said](#) during a panel on Nov. 14.

At the summit, G-20 leaders discussed coordinating policies in response to global threats, including future pandemics.

"We acknowledge the importance of shared technical standards and verification methods, under the framework of the [IHR (2005)](#), to facilitate seamless international travel, interoperability, and recognizing digital solutions and non-digital solutions, including proof of vaccinations," the G-20 joint declaration reads.

The International Health Regulations (2005) is an instrument of international law developed under the auspices of the WHO that lays down a global framework for responding to the international spread of disease.

The WHO-backed standard, which entered into force in 2007, required countries to strengthen surveillance capacities at border crossings and introduced a series of health documents, including international certificates of vaccination.

'Digital Gulag'?

Journalist Nick Corbishley, who writes about economic and political trends in Europe and Latin America, has warned that vaccine passports can lead to the implementation of a global digital identity scheme that will threaten privacy and freedom across the world.

"It's like this checkpoint society. Wherever you want to go, you have to show your mobile phone, your identity … even if it's just to go into a supermarket or go into a shop," he said on EpochTV's "Crossroads."

Corbishley described the negative aspects of a global digital identification scheme as a kind of "digital gulag" in which people could be "effectively banished from society."

"That is a terrifying vision," he said.