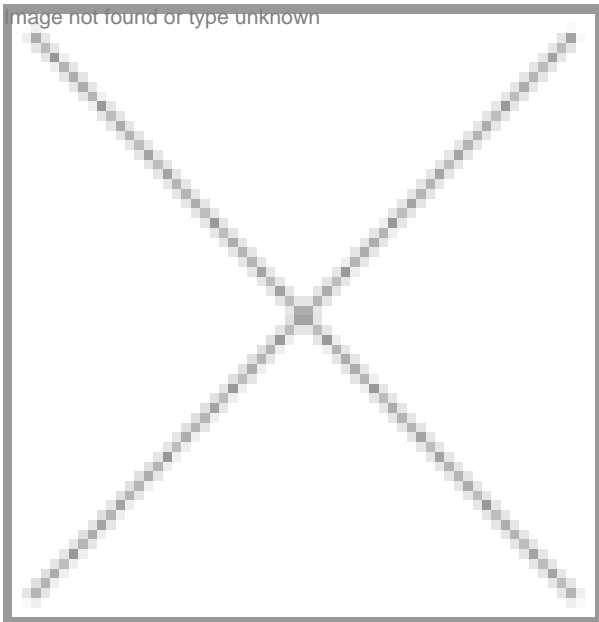


Gates Foundation ramps up vaccine initiatives

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India is on the radar for the US-based philanthropic organization and will certainly benefit from the rolling out of mammoth funding initiatives in vaccine development and delivery



Speaking at the World Economic Forum at Davos last year, Microsoft founder and philanthropist, Bill Gates, called upon the global community and announced that in the coming decade, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation would donate a whopping sum of \$10 billion towards the development and delivery of vaccines to the developing nations of the world. Defining 2011 to 2020, as the decade for vaccines and polio immunization, Mr Gates further added that through these grants, he is looking at creating a drastic drop in child mortality due to diseases like malaria, tuberculosis, pneumonia and diarrhea for which vaccines are yet to be made available. He further said that vaccines for these diseases of 2020.

Amongst developing nations, India stands as a priority region for the foundation. As of December 2010, the foundation committed approximately \$1 billion for health projects in India. The Gates Foundation works on a range of health and development efforts in India, including immunization, maternal and child health, family planning, cultural development.

Speaking to BioSpectrum about the foundation's funding initiatives in the country, Mr Ashok Alexander, India Country Office, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, says, "Though statistics in India reveal that in 2008, approximately 54 percent of children in India received full set of vaccines as recommended in India's national immunization programme, a lot needs to be done. Grants include support to polio eradication efforts through the Global Polio Eradication Initiative (GPEI), the introduction of hepatitis B vaccine through the GAVI Alliance and late-stage clinical development of a new rotavirus vaccine to reduce severe diarrhea in young children." The Gates Foundation also supported the development of the bivalent oral polio vaccine, which was introduced last year in India and has helped reduce cases of polio virus types 1 and 3 to record lows. "India has made remarkable progress against polio, however, outbreaks still persist. Until eradication is achieved, the various program activities have to be continued to end this disease," adds Mr Alexander.

Diseases like pneumonia and diarrhea have off-late been of growing interest to the foundation. Today, in India, pneumonia and diarrhoeal diseases like rotavirus, currently, account for approximately one-third of all deaths among Indian children younger than five years of age. "As the world's leader in vaccine manufacturing, India has an unparalleled ability to develop new, safe and effective vaccines and make them available to Indian children at affordable prices. Through our grantee PATH Vaccine Solutions, the Gates Foundation is working with the Serum Institute of India and Bharat Biotech to support the development of innovative, high-quality, low cost vaccines for rotavirus, which causes severe diarrhea, and pneumococcal disease," says Mr Alexander.

Partnerships

Since its inception, the foundation has been partnering with national and state governments, scientists, manufacturers, NGO and community leaders in exploring ideas on delivering vaccines and other interventions that benefit Indians and others worldwide. "One of our strongest partnerships in India is with the government of Bihar. Along with the state governments and leading domestic and international NGOs, we recently launched a five-year, \$80 million portfolio of grants to address maternal and child health issues," adds Mr Alexander.

Bill and Melinda Gates visited India in March 2011 and met policy makers, non-government partners, business and community leaders, and public health figures (celebrities) urging stakeholders to intensify progress on vaccinating its populace, especially children. During their visit, Bill and Melinda Gates announced that they would pool in grants to fund late stage clinical trials to Pune-based Serum Institute of India and Hyderabad-based, Bharat Biotech International, for pneumonia and rotavirus vaccines. Though the parties were reluctant to reveal the exact value of the grants, reports have highlighted that the foundation is looking at granting around \$30 million for late stage clinical trials of rotavirus vaccines.

Looking Forward

Giving an overall perspective, the Gates Foundation believes that in the avenue of vaccines, India still faces some critical challenges like scaling up routine immunization and access to newer vaccines, such as for measles and certain types of diarrhea and pneumonia. Partnerships with local stakeholders will be a springboard to tackle this challenge. "The foundation will continue to work with the Indian government and all of our local partners to find solutions to scaling up routine immunization and access to vaccines. This includes support for research that reinforces the lifesaving value and cost-effectiveness of these vaccines; continued work with Indian researchers and companies to produce new, safe and less

expensive vaccines and partnerships with governmental and non-governmental groups," concludes Mr Alexander.

Nayantara Som in Mumbai