

High-level mission shines spotlight on challenges facing immunization services in Pakistan

Islamabad, 19 February 2015 – Childhood immunization in Pakistan is at a crossroads and strong political will is required to ensure that the lives of millions of children are not put at risk, three global health leaders warned today.

Almost three million children miss out on a full course of the most basic vaccines every year in Pakistan, leaving them vulnerable to life-threatening diseases. Immunization coverage rates across the country vary widely with some districts seeing very few children protected against diseases, such as diphtheria, pertussis, tetanus, measles and bacterial pneumonia.

A high-level mission, including Dr Seth Berkley, Chief Executive Office of Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, Dr Ala Alwan, WHO Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean and Dr Geeta Rao Gupta, Deputy Executive Director of UNICEF, is meeting with leaders in Islamabad to set out their concerns and offer their support to Pakistan moving forwards.

“It is a tragedy when any child dies from a vaccine-preventable disease,” said Dr Berkley. “The lives of millions of children across Pakistan are at risk because of limited access to vaccines. We have delivered a strong message to leaders that we are ready to work with them to drastically improve this situation and strengthen routine immunization across Pakistan.”

“Deaths among children under five years attributable to vaccine-preventable diseases constitute up to 25% of the total deaths among this age group in developing countries, including Pakistan,” said Dr Ala Alwan, WHO Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean. “Pakistan is not on track for achieving Millennium Development Goal No 4, which aims at reducing child mortality by two thirds by 2015. Increasing routine vaccination coverage will significantly contribute to reducing infant and child deaths and achieving MDG4.”

“The need to improve routine immunization coverage in Pakistan cannot be overemphasized,” said Ms Geeta Rao Gupta, the Deputy Executive Director of UNICEF. “We realise the challenge Pakistan faces regarding immunization and are determined to make 2015 a turning point for the country in terms of immunizing all children, especially those living in marginalized communities

and hard to reach areas. The fact that nearly 400 000 children under the age of five die in Pakistan every year from diseases which can be prevented through vaccine is simply not acceptable. These precious lives can and must be saved.”

The delegation will meet with Prime Minister of Pakistan, His Excellency Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, to highlight the importance of political will in ensuring immunization coverage rises across all regions and districts in Pakistan. There are wide regional variations in coverage across the country’s four main provinces with Punjab seeing a 76% coverage rate while in Baluchistan the rate is just 27%.

The delegation calls for stronger collaboration between the federal and provincial level to tackle the variations in vaccination coverage across the country. Accountability of the Expanded Programme on Immunization (EPI) is seen as critical to increase access to routine immunization as well as recruitment and training of qualified EPI personnel coupled with improved reporting systems.

Gavi currently supports pentavalent vaccine which offers protection against five diseases (diphtheria-tetanus-pertussis (DTP), hepatitis B, and *Haemophilus influenzae* type b) as well as pneumococcal vaccines as part of Pakistan’s routine schedule. Gavi also funds measles vaccination campaigns. With Pakistan planning to introduce the inactivated polio vaccine (IPV) in the coming months, routine immunization will be more important than ever as protection against polio is given to babies along with the antigens against other diseases. By the end of 2015, up to 73 Gavi-supported countries plan to have introduced IPV, which is seen as a key part of the Global Polio Eradication Initiative’s endgame strategic plan.

“Pakistan has a choice to make for its children,” added Dr Berkley. “Routine immunization is the bedrock for access to vaccines against many illnesses, including polio, so by strengthening these systems Pakistan will be making an investment of political will which will benefit many generations to come.”

Notes to editors

About Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance

Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance is a public-private partnership committed to saving children’s lives and protecting people’s health by increasing access to immunisation in poor countries. The Vaccine Alliance brings together developing country and donor governments, the World Health Organization, UNICEF, the World Bank, the vaccine industry, technical agencies, civil society,

the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and other private sector partners. Gavi uses innovative finance mechanisms, including co-financing by recipient countries, to secure sustainable funding and adequate supply of quality vaccines. Since 2000, Gavi has contributed to the immunisation of an additional 500 million children and the prevention of approximately 7 million future deaths. Learn more at www.gavi.org and connect with us on Facebook and Twitter.

Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance is funded by governments (Australia, Brazil, Canada, Denmark, France, Germany, India, Ireland, Italy, Japan, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, the People's Republic of China, Republic of Korea, Russia, South Africa, Spain, the State of Qatar, the Sultanate of Oman, Sweden, United Kingdom, and United States), the European Commission, the OPEC Fund for International Development (OFID), the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and His Highness Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, as well as private and corporate partners (Absolute Return for Kids, Anglo American plc., the A&A Foundation, The Children's Investment Fund Foundation, Comic Relief, the ELMA Vaccines and Immunization Foundation, JP Morgan, Kuwait Youth Committee, "la Caixa" Foundation, LDS Charities, Lions Clubs International Foundation, UPS and Vodafone).

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