

Gates urges African leaders to make vaccines a priority

DAKAR: Microsoft founder Bill Gates has called on African countries to work harder to get life-saving vaccines to children, as their sluggishness could derail efforts to save millions of lives and stamp out deadly diseases.

The magnate, who these days spends more time talking about the "miracle of vaccines" than software, said this week that poor governance often caused children to miss out on life-saving drugs.

He spoke in a telephone interview ahead of a speech to the World Health Assembly in Geneva on Tuesday (17 May 2011) in which he said he will remind the world that technology is only as effective as the leader delivering it.

Gates said that once you have vaccines invented and manufactured at low cost, and rich donors paying for them, "you have to have developing countries act to take the vaccines and get them out to all the kids."

"It is tragic when the last delivery piece holds it back," he said.

"You have some countries, northern Nigeria, or Chad or the DRC (Democratic Republic of Congo) where less than half the kids right now are getting the vaccines," he said, referring to polio immunisation in those countries.

"They are just not putting good people on it, not tracking their results, not even getting out to parts of the country.

"The message has to be clear. They have to see this as their top priority. It hasn't been."

The world is 99% towards making polio the second disease to be wiped out, after smallpox.

The paralysing disease, which once terrorised the developed world, exists now only in a few countries.

Nigeria, the world's most troublesome polio spot, saw a 95% cut in cases last year due to revitalised immunisation but a lack of support from government leaders, which Gates put down to the "distraction of the elections" in the country.

A spread to Chad and the DRC poses great risks for eradication efforts and the two countries carry 58 percent of the total cases of polio this year.

"The key point is to help them get it right, many very, very poor countries do have 90 percent coverage rates. It is not about trained doctors or anything complicated," Gates said.

When vaccines save lives it is "not because of hospitals or doctors or any of the expensive stuff.

"It doesn't require fancy equipment, simply keeping the vaccination cold and getting them out to all the kids.

In Burkina Faso a new meningitis vaccine was rolled out in December 2010 and is showing encouraging results.

In the first 12 weeks of this year there have been only two cases of meningitis in the country compared to in the same period last year, Gates is set to announce.

MenAfriVac is the first vaccine developed specifically for Africa in a bid to stop deadly epidemics in the 25 country meningitis belt which spreads from Senegal to Ethiopia.

If it is introduced throughout southern Africa, the resulting reduction in meningitis cases could free up to \$120 million from national budgets by 2010, according to the World Health Organisation.

For Gates, when it comes to vaccines, a little goes a long way, and any initial money spent in getting the medicines out there has a massive impact in terms of lives and eventually millions saved in healthcare spending.

"As you improve health you are allowing people to develop and be educated."

The Microsoft founder has donated \$10 billion of his sizeable fortune to bring vaccines to children in the next decade, calling on others to invest in vaccines as a cost-effective way to save lives and boost development.

His goal? Five or six new vaccines at an affordable price, and that every country has a system to deliver these vaccines to all children.

"For kids the malaria vaccine would be the next best thing. The funders need to stay behind that research despite the budget challenges they face," said Gates.

Source: AFP