Remarks at Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunizations (GAVI)

Laying the foundation for global health; plenary session on improving health, alleviating poverty

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Well thanks very much Doctor Bruntland.

I would like to pick up from where Mr. Gilmartin just finished. Health is a key issue to us in the fight against poverty and on the question of development.

I think you all know the numbers - 4.8 billion people living in developing countries and I think you know that poverty affects 3 billion people to the extent that they are living under $2 a day and a billion two hundred million living under $1 a day.

We have done a study recently to ask about the causes of poverty and we actually interviewed 60,000 people in poverty in a study we call 'Voices of the Poor.' And if we did not know it before, we now know that the single largest contributor to poverty and the single most vulnerable aspect is in fact health. This is the thing that people find is most affecting their lives. Many other issues apply too but that factor to which 60,000 people in those 60 countries referred most was the health issue. And it is quite understandable because if you are living on the margin at $2 a day or $1 a day and you get sick and you cannot work, then you have obviously no protection and the impact is just enormous.

We discovered this at the bank in the 1980's. Until 1980, we had only put $100 million into health issues, and in only 20 countries. We had gone for more important, as we thought of then, issues in terms of infrastructure and other building activities in countries. But we have now completed close to $16 billion worth of investments in over 280 projects by 1999 -- because central to the issue of development is in fact this question of health.

So we believe that and then when you come to the issue of health itself and you look at the economics of it, you come to the very simple proposition, namely is it better to treat people when they are sick or is it better to try and stop them getting sick and the answer is quite obvious if you can stop people from getting sick, it is cheaper than taking care of them and letting them lose time in their jobs if they do get sick.
And with regards to the 6 vaccines that Carol was talking about; these start at $17 per person. If for $17 a person you can immunize, it is obviously a very sensible thing to do. And on those diseases that require vaccines, then it is sensible for us to cooperate with everybody, particularly the research institutions and vaccine companies, to try and see if that can be developed.

So we have come together in this GAVI project because it is central to the development issue which is impacting the poor and secondly, because there is a ready answer, particularly in terms of children to try and protect them. You do not have to be a scientist to understand that; you do not even have to be the founder of a major communications company, much though I would like to be that. The fact is that for us in development, this is the central issue and so we come together happily Gates Foundation, with the pharmaceutical companies, with WHO and with Carol Bellamy to try and see if we can get this done.

The last point that I would make is this. Leaders such as President Chissano are very very important because you must have the political will in these countries to be able to deal with these questions. You have to have the infrastructure; you have to have the support locally; you have to have the focus on health; and I believe that if we come up with such an initiative, it is very much more possible to deal with political leadership, and that is the partnership that will make it all happen.