

Kenyan church leaders hail pneumococcal vaccine rollout

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Nairobi, February 15 (ENInews)--A global rollout of pneumococcal vaccine aimed at treating pneumonia in infants has come as a welcome development for faith groups who are significant deliverers of health services in Africa.

Kenya's President Mwai Kibaki joined parents, health workers, ambassadors and donors in Nairobi to witness the launch of the vaccine on 14 February, which was being unveiled the first time in Africa.

"Isn't it wonderful," exclaimed Rev. Wellington Mutiso, the general secretary of the Evangelical Alliance of Kenya (EAK) in an interview with ENInews on 15 February, a day after hundreds of infants received the first injections. The vaccine introduction is a project of the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunization (GAVI), which brings together governments, UNICEF, the World Health Organization (WHO) and other key players in global health.

"This is really a breakthrough. It will save millions of children whom we have seen die of pneumonia each year. It is even more ideal, since it will be provided free for some time," added Mutiso.

He said the vaccine will assist in all sectors, and boost churches' efforts against the killer disease. "We are going to see freeing of bed spaces in hospitals. That is a great benefit to us as churches," he said.

Churches in Kenya provide nearly 40 per cent of all health services, with medical clinics standing next to the churches in the most remote parts. That is also the situation in most African countries.

"We have welcomed it positively because it is going to contribute to making the environment healthier. It is also going to make the family healthier. We need a healthy family for a healthy church," said the Rev. John Gathanju, the moderator of

the Presbyterian Church of East Africa (PCEA).

Kibaki urged parents to ensure their children are vaccinated since the vaccine would be provided free in public health facilities. "The vaccine will also be provided in recognized immunization centres in faith based health facilities. This will make it more accessible to Kenyans," said Kibaki.

GAVI said in a news release on 14 February that it has committed to support introduction of the vaccines in 19 developing countries within a year, and 40 more countries by 2015, if it gets sufficient funding from its donors.

"The roll-out of the pneumococcal vaccine has become a reality across the world allowing developing country governments to reduce deaths and enable millions of children to grow up healthy," said Helen Evans, interim CEO of GAVI in the news release.

According to WHO, more than half a million children die before their fifth birthday each year. Pneumonia is the most common form of serious pneumococcal disease and accounts for 18 per cent of child deaths in developing countries. It kills more than one million people every year, said WHO.