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Drugmakers Join Gates Foundation in Tropical-Disease Fight

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By Albertina Torsoli and Makiko Kitamura - Jan 30, 2012 5:48 AMPT

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GlaxoSmithKline Plc (GSK), Sanofi and other health-care companies are joining forces with the [Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation](#), governments and institutions to fight so-called neglected tropical diseases such as leprosy.

Partners in the initiative, including 13 drugmakers, pledged to come up with new products and infrastructure to improve the lives of the 1.4 billion people affected by 10 illnesses such as [visceral leishmaniasis](#), river blindness and lymphatic filariasis, the manufacturers said at a joint press conference in London today.

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Jan. 30 (Bloomberg) — Paul Stoffels, worldwide chairman of pharmaceuticals at Johnson & Johnson, talks about the efforts of 13 global pharmaceutical companies to eradicate so-called neglected tropical diseases by the end of the decade. Stoffels speaks with Mark Crumpton on Bloomberg Television's "Bottom Line." (Source: Bloomberg)

The group will include the [World Bank](#), the U.S., U.K. and United Arab Emirates governments and global health organizations working to accelerate progress in treating debilitating and fatal illnesses that thrive in hot and humid conditions. Commitments total \$785 million for research, development and distribution, including \$363 million from the foundation over five years for research, the partners said.

"It used to be that people would commit to a donation but nobody would order the drug because there wasn't money to do the delivery," [Bill Gates](#), the co-founder of Microsoft Corp. who is co-chairman of the foundation, said in an interview. "Here, because you've got delivery money being committed and manufacturing money being committed,

every year the amount of people who get this mass drug administration is going to be 10 times what it's been."

Diseases' Toll

Visceral leishmaniasis, caused by a parasite attacking the spleen and liver, can lead to death within two years if left untreated, according to the [World Health Organization](#). [Leprosy](#), transmitted via droplets from the nose and mouth of untreated patients, can cause nerve damage, leading to muscle weakness and atrophy as well as permanent disabilities.

Participants in the neglected tropical diseases project promised to sustain or expand existing drug donations to meet demand through 2020, the group said today. They also committed to sharing expertise and compounds to speed up the search for new treatments. The program is

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intended to follow goals set out in the WHO's 2020 Roadmap on Neglected Tropical Diseases.

"Before, there were some initiatives here or there" to halt or cure the illnesses, [Sanofi \(SAN\)](#) Chief Executive Officer [Chris Viehbacher](#) said at a press briefing. The joint initiative "launches a real war against these 10 diseases. We are seeing unprecedented collaboration, especially in R&D."

The WHO's goals are "completely unachievable" without the joint effort, Gates said.

Foundation's Pledge

The project is part of the Seattle-based Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation's work on treating neglected tropical diseases in the past decade. The foundation pledged on Jan. 26 to provide \$750 million in grants over six years to the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria to make up for cutbacks in government donations.

In addition to Glaxo and Sanofi, drugmakers participating in the project announced today include [Novartis AG \(NOVN\)](#); Bristol-Myers Squibb Co.; Pfizer Inc.; [Johnson & Johnson \(JNJ\)](#); Gilead Sciences Inc.; Merck & Co.; [Bayer AG \(BAYN\)](#); [Merck KGaA \(MRK\)](#); Eisai Co.; [Abbott Laboratories \(ABT\)](#) and [AstraZeneca Plc. \(AZN\)](#)

"If you want to travel fast, travel alone; if you want to travel far, travel in a group," Glaxo CEO [Andrew Witty](#) said at the main press conference, citing an African proverb.

Gates also said the public-private collaboration model could be extended to other initiatives his foundation supports, such as agriculture and education.

"The execution, excellence and depth of understanding the problem is very strong in private-sector companies," Gates said in the interview. "If you can find a way to draw them in, it's absolutely the right way to do it."

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