

19 September 2019

Dear polio eradication supporter,

Last month, we passed a tantalizing milestone on the road to a polio-free world. Three years passed since a child was paralyzed by wild poliovirus on the African continent. With our sleeves rolled up to reach the next milestones, I'd like to pause and thank all those who worked to bring us to this place, from parents to health workers to heads of state.

The [Polio Endgame Strategy 2019-2023: Eradication, Integration, Containment and Certification](#), which we launched in May, is now in full swing. And we have our work cut out for us. Against the backdrop of the encouraging signs in Africa against wild poliovirus, Pakistan is suffering a large outbreak and Afghanistan is struggling to access all its children. Meanwhile, circulating vaccine-derived poliovirus (cVDPV) is exploiting weak immunization systems in several African countries. This is a potentially dangerous moment.

How do we turn this corner? The integration pillar of our strategy will be especially important. Strong immunization systems are the foundation of a sustainable polio-free future. The Democratic Republic of the Congo recently set the example with its Forum on Immunization and Polio Eradication, where some of my fellow Polio Oversight Board (POB) members were present as national and provincial authorities signed the Kinshasa declaration to champion stronger vaccination coverage with concrete steps in implementation and financing.

On the other side of the planet, Papua New Guinea appears to have stopped its outbreak of cVDPV with support from Global Polio Eradication Initiative (GPEI) partners. The many actors of the routine immunization community – government programmes, civil society, international organizations and Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance – have played a key role in a roadmap to maintain the gains made during the outbreak response and translating these into sustainable steps to strengthen the immunization system. The Gavi Board approved its commitment to financing Inactivated Polio Vaccine in June, and other GPEI partners are now participating formally in Gavi Joint Country Appraisals – all concrete moves towards integration.

On our support to Pakistan and Afghanistan, the GPEI hub in Amman is now up and running. The Technical Advisory Groups of both countries met in late August and I look forward to hearing their recommendations so we can act on them. On the challenge of cVDPVs, we are consulting with the best scientific minds from biological to social sciences in intense debate about curbing these viruses and engaging communities. The outcomes of these discussions will be presented to the Strategic Advisory Group of Experts on Immunization in October.



*A member of a volunteer vaccination team provides oral polio vaccine to a baby during the national immunization campaign in Hargeisa, Somaliland. © WHO*

In the frequent conversations that I have with donors, I am constantly impressed by their level of commitment to polio eradication. This is no doubt because some of these donors are true partners, as informed and invested in the programme as operational partners and national governments of polio-affected countries. I hope that we can all come together in Abu Dhabi at the Reaching the Last Mile Forum on 19 November 2019 to pledge that commitment publicly.

Last week, I attended the global vaccine summit in Brussels, co-hosted by WHO and the European Union. While this summit revolved around vaccine hesitancy, this is of course only one reason – and not the main one – that children miss out on vaccination. The main reason is that we do not deliver. Children without access to vaccination services will not be vaccinated. Polio eradication has shown that vaccines can reach even the most isolated children, in nearly every single country of the world. But it has also shown us that without community buy-in, and without government leadership – across parties and differing political positions we cannot deliver vaccination to all.

That buy-in is what we need to attain and sustain until the job is done. Biology is on our side to defeat polio; human society needs to stand by our side too. I hope we can count on you all.

Yours faithfully,

Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus  
Chair of the Polio Oversight Board

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**MEMBERS OF THE POLIO OVERSIGHT BOARD**

World Health Organization, 20 avenue Appia, 1211 Geneva 27  
Rotary International, 1560 Sherman Avenue, Evanston, IL 60201-3698  
US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 1600 Clifton Rd. NE Atlanta, GA 30333  
UNICEF, 3 United Nations Plaza, New York, New York 10017  
Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, 440 5th Ave N. Seattle, WA  
Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, Chemin du Pommier 40, 1218 Grand-Saconnex, Geneva