

Dear polio eradication supporter,

This is the last Polio Oversight Board (POB) letter of the year, and the last time that I will be writing to you as POB chair. As of January, in accordance with our practice of rotating chairs every two years, the Chair will rotate to Dr Chris Elias, President of Global Development at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. I would like to welcome Chris in his new role and look forward to working with him.

2020 has been a year of unprecedented challenges and turmoil for health in all countries. The polio programme has not been exempt from the disruptions COVID-19 has caused, which critically has meant that too many people have not accessed the health services they need. The pause in vaccination campaigns, together with the disruption of essential immunization services, led to decreased immunity in many vulnerable populations, and we have seen a disturbing increase in polio cases in Afghanistan and Pakistan, as well as more outbreaks of circulating vaccine-derived polio viruses. Tragically, we also lost some front line polio workers to COVID-19. This is why last month UNICEF and WHO launched a [Call to Action](#), calling on governments and donors to step up efforts to stop polio and measles outbreaks in their tracks. I would like to thank in particular the Governments of Sudan, Turkey, and the Philippines, as well as the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, for their rapid response to this appeal, and call on others to join them.

In the midst of this difficult year, there has been some reason for hope in the polio programme. As I described in my previous letter, the certification of the World Health Organization's (WHO) African Region as free of wild polio virus was a long-awaited public health milestone. The World Health Assembly (WHA) saw a celebration of this milestone, and importantly a commitment from countries to finish the job of eradicating polio globally.

Another important milestone was reached when WHO issued an [Emergency Use Listing \(EUL\) recommendation for a new polio vaccine](#) – type 2 novel oral polio vaccine (nOPV2). This vaccine, which has been in development for nearly a decade, will be deployed to more sustainably tackle type 2 circulating vaccine-derived poliovirus outbreaks. Preparations are now underway to ensure that countries are ready to use the vaccine. This will build on the poliovirus type 2 outbreak response strategy for GPEI, which has already seen 16 outbreaks closed this year, and a restart of campaigns with more than 40 million children being vaccinated across the African region alone.

I have also talked about the important role of polio staff in responding to COVID-19, and I have personally been touched to hear of their commitment, applying what they have learned in polio eradication to fight this new virus. A significant portion of our polio workforce are women, often working in difficult operating environments. This year the GPEI launched [the Gender Champion Initiative](#) in support of the GPEI's Gender Equality Strategy. On World Polio Day, the POB Members were officially joined by Foreign Ministers from Australia, Spain and the United Kingdom. We are grateful for the leadership and commitment of our Champions to ensure gender equality and women's empowered engagement in the global effort. The POB looks forward to continued engagement with our Champions in 2021 and we hope others will join.

While these positive signs give hope, the Polio Oversight Board is very conscious that the polio programme faces some big challenges. While we must and will continue to ensure that polio assets support the global response to the pandemic, and the rollout of the approved COVID-19 vaccines, we will not lose sight of the challenges we face, or our ultimate goal.

M E M B E R S O F T H E P O L I O O V E R S I G H T B O A R D



Besides her work on COVID-19 response, Nasrin teaches women in her community about symptoms of polio and how it can be prevented. © WHO Afghanistan / R.Haidari

The Polio Oversight Board met on 18 December 2020 to set some important directions for 2021. We heard from Ministers of Health from the last two polio endemic countries, on their views on what needs to be done differently. We noted the latest revisions of the Polio Strategy and approved the general direction of ensuring greater government ownership, accelerating integration, and fostering innovation. We are also completing a process of reviewing the way the partnership is governed and managed to ensure that GPEI is fit for purpose to implement the new strategy. In view of financial constraints, we approved a new budget which directs resources to where they will be most effective.

In my first letter as Polio Oversight Board Chair I spoke of my optimism that polio would be eradicated. The commitments at the WHA, the new tools and innovations, and the proof that polio transmission can be stopped in even the most difficult circumstances reaffirms that optimism, even in this very challenging year.

The end of 2020 also marks the beginning of a new adventure for Michel Zaffran, WHO’s Director of Polio Eradication, who will be taking well-deserved retirement. Michel leaves a legacy of one less strain of poliovirus, one more continent free of WPV, one new polio vaccine formulation, one new gender equality strategy, a stronger bridge between polio eradication and of essential immunization, and countless public health colleagues he has trained, mentored and inspired.

Michel will be succeeded by Mr Aidan O’Leary, whose previous role was as Head of Office in Yemen for the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA).

Mr O’Leary has strong experience of working on polio eradication including as Chief of Polio Eradication in Pakistan for UNICEF from 2015-2017 and as Head of Office for OCHA in Afghanistan from 2011-2014. I look forward to working with Aidan.

Thank you for your support and above all for your commitment to polio eradication. I wish you and your loved ones the best for 2021.

Yours faithfully,

Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus
Chair of the Polio Oversight Board

MEMBERS OF THE POLIO OVERSIGHT BOARD

