

25 June 2019

Dear polio eradication partner,

In May, on behalf of the Polio Oversight Board, I hosted a small reception to launch the new Global Polio Eradication Initiative Endgame Strategy 2019-2023 – the plan that aims to take us over the finish line. Representatives of Afghanistan, Pakistan and Nigeria energized us with their impassioned and heartfelt statements of dedication to seeing polio through to the end, as a gift to the children of their countries and of the world.



*GPEI Strategic Plan 2019-2023 Launch:  
From left:*

*Ms Sona Bari, Coordinator, Polio Eradication, WHO;*

*Dr Ferozuddin Feroz, Minister of Public Health, Afghanistan;*

*Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, the Director-General, WHO;*

*Dr Zafar Mirza, Pakistan's Minister of State, Ministry of National Health Services, Regulations and Coordination;*

*Dr Ahmed Al-Mandhari, Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean, WHO*

Just before this launch, I met with POB members in New York, where we were joined for the first time by Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance. Our discussions focused on what needs to be done to ensure the success of the 2019-2023 Endgame Strategy. Each POB member committed to bring the specific strength of their organization to bear on supporting governments to implement the plan. We also endorsed the first GPEI gender equality strategy, placing gender at the core of our endgame efforts. I was encouraged by support expressed by donors to the strategies discussed during this meeting.

And not a moment too soon. Soon after we met in New York, the Emergency Committee established under the International Health Regulations expressed grave concern about the state of polio eradication. A virus related to that in Pakistan had popped up in the sewage of Iran, and vaccine-derived polio – a sign of low vaccination coverage – had appeared in Cameroon and the Central African Republic. The virus is reminding us of its power. We are at a very delicate juncture. We don't want this virus back in places from which we have worked hard to expel it. That is why we need this new roadmap to eradication.

At the World Health Assembly, countries welcomed the new strategy, which maps out how we can finish the job: a sharp focus on reaching every child in those remaining under-served communities; systematic coordination with immunization systems and partners, including Gavi, to sustain a polio-free world and support the delivery of services that communities want; and the necessary vigilance on the virus to have confidence in certification and containment.

I recently met Dr Maryam Mallick from Pakistan, who runs a rehabilitation programme for children affected by polio. Even as she prescribes therapy or surgery that will help them reach their full potential, she hopes to be out of this work soon. She looks forward to the day when there will be no more children paralysed by polio to treat.

We each must do our part to see that day. Together with Dr Ahmed Al-Mandhari, WHO's Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean, and POB members Chris Elias, Robert Redfield and Seth Berkley, we spoke at length to the ministers from Pakistan and Afghanistan in May: they are committed, but they cannot do it alone.

I'm happy to announce that in order to give closer and more immediate support to Pakistan and Afghanistan, we are setting up a regional hub in Amman, Jordan, comprised of senior GPEI staff devoted to providing people and advice to the two countries. The coordinator for this hub will report to Dr Hamid Jafari, the newly appointed Director of Polio in the Eastern Mediterranean Region and the man under whom India eradicated polio.



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*Polio vaccinators climb up a truck to vaccinate a child at the Torkham border in Nangarhar, the busiest border crossing in Afghanistan.*

Whether we are health leaders, administrative officials at local levels, donors, parents – whatever the multiple roles we play in society – we must each do our part. All the pieces must come together.

One piece of this is in place already. I am looking forward to working with Polio Oversight Board members, and the UAE and the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi towards a successful pledging moment in Abu Dhabi in November.

Another piece now in place is our close coordination with the broader immunization community. This is a mutual need. Only strong immunity can protect the world from a resurgence of poliovirus or epidemics of vaccine-derived polio. And a polio-free world proves that if we work together, we can protect all children equally from vaccine-preventable disease.

I look forward to the remaining pieces falling into place and to poliovirus falling into oblivion.

Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus  
Chair, Polio Oversight Board