

Dear Colleagues,

At the end of January, I travelled to Geneva for the first Polio Oversight Board (POB) meeting of the year, where partners reviewed the “last mile” strategies needed following 2017’s record-low number of wild polio cases (22 cases worldwide). I’d like to use this letter to give an update on progress and challenges in the remaining polio-affected countries, and the steps being taken in the coming months to achieve and maintain a polio-free world.

Commitment to Eradication in Endemic Countries

Pakistan

The meeting began on a somber note, with a minute of silence for two polio workers, Sakina and Rizwana Bibi, who were [killed](#) while immunizing children in Pakistan on 18 January. The commitment of heroes like Sakina and Rizwana – who work tirelessly to reach all children with vaccines, no matter where they live – is the main reason why Pakistan saw only 8 cases of wild polio in 2017, its lowest case count in history. This year, the country plans to build on this momentum by increasing technical support for provincial polio teams and strengthening environmental surveillance in key regions. It was heartening to hear that these initiatives have the support of Pakistani Prime Minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi, who affirmed his commitment to eradication when we met in Davos before the POB meeting.



A child in Afghanistan receives the polio vaccine.

Afghanistan

Afghanistan saw 14 cases of wild polio last year – an 80% decrease in cases since 2011, but a slight increase from the 13 cases reported in 2016. While Afghanistan has stopped the virus in much of the country, some populations are still inaccessible due to security concerns, and campaign quality remains suboptimal in certain high-risk districts. To overcome these challenges, experts outlined their goals to improve campaign planning and the selection of frontline health workers, and to continue dialogue with all parties to ensure health workers can reach children everywhere with vaccines.

Nigeria

While the POB was pleased to hear that Nigeria has not reported a case of wild polio since August 2016, conflict in the northeast has led to significant gaps in surveillance and population immunity. Program representatives shared plans to reach high-risk areas and coordinate immunization activities between all countries in the Lake Chad Basin to ensure that Nigeria stomps out the virus for good.

Stopping Vaccine-Derived Polio – Now and in the Future

The POB also heard updates from Syria and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), which are in the midst of outbreaks of vaccine-derived polio as a result of large under-immunized populations. Partners at all levels have continued working to end the outbreaks as soon as possible: health workers vaccinated almost [850,000 children](#) in the DRC in December, and over [665,000 children](#) in Syria in January.

Preventing cases of vaccine-derived polio is one of the core goals of the Post Certification Strategy (PCS), which the POB approved for presentation at the World Health Assembly in May. The PCS outlines plans for countries to shift to using the inactivated polio vaccine (IPV) – which doesn't carry the same risk of vaccine-derived polio outbreaks – and maintaining high-quality surveillance so that any outbreaks can be quickly identified and stopped. During the meeting, the POB also discussed plans to start preparing this year for a polio-free world, including helping countries understand their PCS responsibilities and engaging non-Global Polio Eradication Initiative (GPEI) stakeholders on transition activities.

GPEI is at a critical but exciting time in its history. Our efforts over the coming months will determine the trajectory of the eradication effort, and I look forward to continuing our work together in 2018 to end the virus once and for all.

To help the Polio Oversight Board make these letters as helpful as possible, I would appreciate if you could take a moment to complete [this survey](#). The survey should take no longer than 2 minutes.

Thank you,

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of several fluid, overlapping strokes that form the name 'Chris Elias'.

Chris Elias
President, Global Development, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation
Chairman, Polio Oversight Board