

Dear polio eradication supporter,

I hope that you and your loved ones are well in this difficult time. As every day brings news of losses and uncertainty, I wish you mental and physical health. What sustains me each day are the stories of sharing – people sharing food, succour and music; countries sharing scientific knowledge and medical supplies.

One such group of people are polio workers who are now active in the response to COVID-19. My fellow Polio Oversight Board members and I sent them [our heartfelt thanks](#) earlier this month.

Polio workers are just some of the many health workers around the world responding to the pandemic in places where health systems are crumbling, in the midst of conflict, or in remote areas. Knowing this, in early April the Polio Oversight Board [decided to pause](#) the Global Polio Eradication Initiative's preventive vaccination campaigns, in line with WHO's '[Guiding principles for immunization activities](#)'. It was a hard decision, but it was the right decision: because we must protect our workers and the communities they serve. We know that inevitably, cases of polio will rise, and that the financial cost will be higher when we start working to regain lost ground. If countries wish to conduct outbreak response mass vaccination campaigns, we will support them to carefully weigh the chance of more children being paralyzed by polio against the risk of more people falling sick with COVID-19.

While campaigns have paused, our determination to eradicate polio remains firm. GPEI is carrying on with many essential functions, including surveillance, ensuring vaccine supply and research to improve our vaccines and how we deliver them.

And we are getting ready for the time when it is safe to resume full operations. Polio eradication is still a public health emergency of international concern.

We remember from nearly 20 years ago the human and financial cost of polio outbreaks, when polio spread into 23 countries, paralyzed over 1500 children and cost nearly half a billion dollars to control. The GPEI will model the potential for outbreaks and associated costs as a result of COVID-19. We will take this time to ensure that in outbreak preparedness, the global health community mainstreams polio into planning; that in budgeting, we integrate polio and other vaccine-preventable diseases; and that in post-COVID-19 recovery planning, we include the tactics and financing of polio eradication. When we share those findings, I hope that our stakeholders will come to the table with the necessary financing. To strengthen our accountability we are moving forward with the GPEI governance review.

We are deeply concerned about the impact of this pandemic on basic health services, including immunization. As health systems struggle to cope, as supply chains are disrupted, and with the need for physical distancing, people will miss their vaccinations. Polio, measles and other vaccine-preventable diseases will rise, especially among the most vulnerable in society.

To mitigate this risk, GPEI will continue to improve support for essential immunization, to protect people from all vaccine-preventable diseases. Our contributions range from maintaining disease surveillance to building trust with communities by helping provide basic services. As we integrate polio workers, knowledge and assets into the COVID-19 response, we will quantify and qualify this support to measure the true value to public health of such networks. Let us change the culture to strengthen the horizontal, cross-cutting, and collaborative potential of programmes such as GPEI.

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



In Maiwand District of Kandahar, children learnt best hand-washing practices as over 671,888 soap bars were distributed by the polio programme. © UNICEF/AFG2020/Marouf Hamdard

And when we resume full operations, we will intensify our efforts to ensure campaigns also respond to other vaccine preventable disease outbreaks, and strengthen essential immunization services, working with immunization partners. This month, we will mark World Immunization Week. Let us not forget that immunization is one of the greatest successes in the history of public health. In June, Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, will launch its

replenishment. We don't know what the status of the pandemic will be then, but we know it will not be over. I call on donors to replenish Gavi for its critical role in supporting eligible countries to obtain vaccines and to strengthen their ability to deliver immunization. We all play a role in the success of immunization, and we are all responsible for making sure that every child benefits from its protection.

Yours faithfully,

Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus
Chair of the Polio Oversight Board

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