

14 February 2019

Dear polio eradication partner,

We are delighted to write this first letter of the year jointly as the incoming and outgoing chairs of the Polio Oversight Board.

This is a critical year in our historic effort to end polio. At the time of writing, one case of wild poliovirus has been detected this year, in Afghanistan. Our commitment is to do everything we can to ensure that 2019 goes down in history as the last year with a recorded case of polio. We are both deeply committed to the eradication of poliovirus and to our unique partnership.

That's why we decided to start the year by visiting Pakistan, to meet the many incredible women and men who are leading the final push to rid the world of polio, from the front lines to the top tiers of government, as well as donors and other partners. Tedros also visited Afghanistan with the WHO Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean, Dr Ahmed Al-Mandhari.

During the visit, Tedros had the honour of vaccinating a child against polio. This simple gesture is the engine of eradication. Health workers worldwide do this every day, sometimes in difficult and even dangerous conditions. Since it started in 1988, more than 20 million polio vaccinators have performed this simple but life-saving act.

During our visit, government officials – including the Heads of State – in Afghanistan and Pakistan stressed their commitment to polio eradication even in the face of multiple challenges.

We echo that commitment. Not only will we increase human resources, we will use our voices to advocate for them and draw attention to their challenges and achievements.

Looking ahead, there are many reasons for optimism. Both Afghanistan and Pakistan have the pieces in place to stop wild poliovirus, but challenges remain. Children are not getting their vaccines for reasons that are different in each community; we must find solutions for each situation.



Dr Tedros, Dr Al Mandhari and Chris Elias with Pakistan's Director-General Health and Director to Minister of Health, along with colleagues from the Pakistan Emergency Operations Centre for polio eradication. © WHO Pakistan

Decades of conflict have left much destruction and despair in Afghanistan: the quality of health care is suffering and in some parts of the country, health workers cannot access children. But we can offer hope by engaging in greater dialogue with communities to increase access to polio vaccination and other life-saving health services.

Many of the communities where poliovirus is active are also communities where children are still missing out on other life-saving vaccines. That's why the most recent partner to join our board is Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, as a concrete mark of our efforts to close the inequities in immunization.

Lack of access to vaccines is a symptom of a bigger problem: although many families have seen years of polio vaccination, they still do not have running water, electricity or access to essential health services. While in Afghanistan, Tedros joined the Minister of Public Health, Dr Ferozudin Feroz, to launch the Integrated Package of Essential Health Services, a vital step in Afghanistan's journey towards universal health coverage.

We returned from our trip re-energized from meeting the people who are working every day to give our children and all future generations a world free of polio. Their commitment is our inspiration, and we call on all our partners – financial and political, scientific and operational – to stand by them.



Dr Tedros and Dr Al Mandhari with WHO Afghanistan staff. © WHO Afghanistan

Our board will shortly be reviewing a new strategy for polio eradication for 2019-23. We thank those who have taken the time to give input and guidance on this document. The strategy relies on the tools that have helped us come this far, but with a renewed focus on innovation and impact to take us over the last hump in the road. Please continue to write to us with your ideas.

Thank you for your commitment and support. Together, we are committed to working with you for a world in which polio exists only in history books.

Best wishes,

Handwritten signature of Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus.

Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus
Director-General
World Health Organization

Handwritten signature of Dr. Chris Elias.

Dr Chris Elias
President, Global Development Division
Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation