

14 April 2020

Sir Liam Donaldson
Chair
Independent Monitoring Board

Dear Sir Liam,

Thank you to the Independent Monitoring Board for issuing the November 2019 report “The Art of Survival: The Polio Virus Continues to Exploit Human Frailties,” a clear and unbiased assessment of the Global Polio Eradication Initiative (GPEI).

Despite the programme’s challenges, and a “pause” of many of its field activities in support of the COVID-19 response, the GPEI remains focused on defining a path through the current contextual challenges to achieve polio eradication.

Since the 17th meeting of the IMB, the GPEI has operationalized two major initiatives. The Afghanistan and Pakistan Hub officially launched in February 2020 and has provided an effective platform to support and better engage with the National Polio Eradication Programmes in the two remaining endemic countries.

The “Strategy for the Response to Type 2 Circulating Vaccine-Derived Poliovirus 2020–2021,” an addendum to the Polio Endgame Strategy, 2019–2023, released in March 2020, defines measures to stop cVDPV2 spread. It prioritizes the use of programme assets, enhances partnerships with essential immunization and utilizes a new vaccine, novel oral polio vaccine type 2 (nOPV2), to improve outbreak response outcomes.

In addition to the above initiatives, the attached table lists the actions taken to address the IMB’s most recent recommendations, which include:

- High-level advocacy from GPEI leadership and other influencers to encourage the Pakistan government to fully commit to polio eradication
- In Afghanistan, engagement with anti-government groups has been carried out through regional government intermediaries
- New communication approaches are being explored to improve vaccine acceptance, particularly within Pashtun communities
- Pakistan’s EPI and PEI programmes have aligned workstreams to improve essential immunization coverage
- The Hub and GPEI contractors have enhanced Afghanistan’s and Pakistan’s data analysis capabilities and provided a set of programme performance measures
- GPEI is encouraging development agencies to further invest in Afghanistan’s and Pakistan’s sanitary and basic health infrastructure and to provide other services in poor communities
- Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Nigeria had made significant progress in controlling the country’s cVDPV2 transmission

- The “Strategy for the Response to Type 2 Circulating Vaccine-Derived Poliovirus” will be coordinated through an inter-agency, multi-disciplinary team, synergizing the efforts of the global partnership.

Since November 2019, the polio programme has taken aggressive measures to address its greatest challenges, but due to the COVID-19 pandemic, on 24 March the Polio Oversight Board took the difficult decision to temporarily pause some polio operations, including vaccination campaigns. Other key activities will continue, including sustaining surveillance and accelerating the roll out of nOPV2.

Attached are the three guidance notes sent by GPEI and the UNICEF and WHO immunization teams that outline GPEI’s support to COVID-19 and contingency plans during the pandemic. The notes explain the following:

1. GPEI recommendations to countries during the pandemic
2. The polio programme continuity plan, which outlines measures to ensure essential GPEI functions continue, polio program personnel and staff are kept safe and planning for a fast and effective resumption of polio eradication activities including supplementary immunization activities as soon as the public health situation allows
3. Guiding Principles on Immunization Services during COVID-19. Developed by WHO/IVB in collaboration with SAGE, this document lays out guidance for maintaining critical routine immunization activities during COVID-19, as part of essential health services, and urges caution if proceeding with SIA or campaign activities.

The GPEI is actively engaged in contingency planning and has established a small team reporting to the Strategy Committee chair to assess the impact of COVID-19 on the programme, and to develop a prioritized strategy to resume all polio activities at the earliest possible time with indicators that will allow the programme to know when the time is right.

On behalf of the GPEI—from the global to field levels—I would like to thank the IMB for the crucial role that you play in this programme. We look forward to the opportunity to continue to discuss the programme’s progress and challenges with you. If there is any additional information that would be of help to you and your colleagues, please do not hesitate to ask.

Yours sincerely



Michel Zaffran
on behalf of the GPEI Strategy Committee

Attachments:

1. GPEI responses to IMB 17th
2. Strategy for the Response to Type 2 Circulating Vaccine-Derived Poliovirus 2020–2021
3. GPEI recommendations to countries during the COVID-19 pandemic
4. GPEI COVID-19 Polio program continuity plan
5. Guiding Principles on Immunization Services during COVID-19