

Dear polio eradication supporter,

Last month I was delighted to join a very long-awaited celebration at the WHO African Regional Committee of a global public health milestone.

On 25 August 2020, the Africa Regional Certification Commission certified the eradication of wild poliovirus from the WHO African Region. Since 1996, when Nelson Mandela launched Kick Polio out of Africa, 1.8 million cases of wild poliovirus have been prevented. This achievement reflects years of dedicated effort by thousands of health workers and volunteers and various stakeholders. It is a testament to country ownership and commitment, extraordinary partnerships, and investment by the global community.



Beyond polio eradication, polio infrastructure including health workers, community mobilization networks and disease surveillance systems have contributed to public health and outbreak response systems throughout the continent. Polio eradication workers have helped bolster immunization against other vaccine-preventable diseases, stop outbreaks like Ebola and yellow fever, and counsel new mothers on breastfeeding while administering oral polio vaccine at birth. They have delivered deworming medicines, bed nets to protect against

malaria and oral rehydration solution to stop diarrheal diseases. The polio programme has helped build disease surveillance systems across Africa, leading to the establishment of other disease-specific laboratory networks around the region, including for measles and rubella, meningitis, rotavirus, and yellow fever. And now, building on decades of experience stopping polio outbreaks, the polio programme is lending its fullest support to protect communities from COVID-19.

In a world which faces seemingly endless crises and challenges, this milestone is an important reminder of the power of global collaboration, and our collective capacity to bring positive change.

But our work is not done. While the WHO African Region is now free of wild poliovirus, the virus continues to circulate in Pakistan and Afghanistan. In today's interconnected world, we must keep population immunity levels high, so wild poliovirus does not come back to paralyze children in Africa. Worryingly, parts of Africa are now facing the spread of type 2 circulating vaccine-derived poliovirus (cVDPV2) outbreaks.

The Polio Oversight Board met in August. We heard of the impact of the pandemic on programme operations and the work to safely restart supplementary immunization campaigns. It was sobering to reflect that the gains that led to the African region being declared wild polio-free were made before the start of the pandemic, and that COVID-19 has severely disrupted essential immunization programmes in all countries, with over 80 million children at increased risk of vaccine-preventable diseases. We heard that surveillance for poliovirus has suffered and that restarting immunization campaigns safely will lead to increased costs.

MEMBERS OF THE POLIO OVERSIGHT BOARD



At the same time, we were encouraged to hear about efforts to restart campaigns in both outbreak and endemic countries, using the GPEI protocols and guidelines developed earlier this year.

We also heard that despite the generous commitments in Abu Dhabi last November, recent evolutions, including rising vaccine-derived poliovirus cases, mean that GPEI is facing a significant financial shortfall in 2021. GPEI will be reaching out to donors, but also looking at how we can best achieve efficiencies in our programme spending, with a focus on maximizing resources. Faced with the urgency of moving towards polio

eradication in a changing context, the Board has approved the rapid revision of the GPEI polio eradication strategy, and I look forward to hearing your views on what revisions are needed.

I know that many of you are directly involved in the process already, but I also invite you to share any ideas or views you have with me directly at [pob@who.int](mailto:pob@who.int).

I count on your continued commitment and support, both financially and politically, to make a polio-free world a reality.



Area Supervisor Erum vaccinating Aqeel, a child in Karachi during outbreak response in July 2020, Pakistan.

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Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus  
Chair of the Polio Oversight Board

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