

CHAIRS' STATEMENT

22nd High-Level Virtual Meeting of the Global Polio Partners Group 16.00-18.00 CET, Thursday, 26 October 2023

Please note that meeting presentations are available on the [PPG website](#).

On 26 October 2023, the Polio Partners Group (PPG) of the Global Polio Eradication Initiative (GPEI) convened virtually for the twenty-second high-level meeting of polio stakeholders. The meeting was attended by over 50 representatives from core GPEI partners including stakeholders from governments at the ambassadorial, senior official, and technical levels, as well as international organizations, foundations, and donors.

Opening Remarks

Co-Chair Dr. Linda Venczel of PATH welcomed the meeting participants and expressed gratitude for the commitment and enthusiasm for polio eradication despite a challenging and extremely busy year. She outlined the meeting agenda, including recommendations from the Independent Monitoring Board (IMB/TIMB) report, updates on the status of polio eradication, recommendations for use of various polio containing vaccines, and discussion on what collective action and decisions are needed for polio transition to be successful. Dr. Venczel asked the plenary to focus on the title of the newest IMB report: "Closing in on Zero – Adapting to Complexity and Risk on the Path to End Polio". She then shared an update from Dr Chris Elias, Chair of the Polio Oversight Board (POB), for the plenary's consideration and support. Namely, at the POB meeting in October, they had the opportunity to collaborate and finalize the collective response to the report and discuss the necessary actions that must be taken to overcome the remaining hurdles to deliver a polio-free world. The POB took the following decisions: for Goal 1, they agreed to continue to target the current timeline to interrupt transmission in the endemic countries in the 2024 low season and achieve certification in 2026. For Goal 2, they agreed to extend the timeline for cVDPV interruption to 2025 with certification in 2028. Lastly, the 2024 GPEI operational budget was approved with a request to have the Multi-Year Budget developed by the end of Q2 2024. The GPEI remains confident they can eradicate this deadly disease. But the findings of the report make clear that there remains an urgent need for renewed commitments from partners, donors, and country governments, in addition to program improvements, to seize the window of opportunity to end polio for good. Dr. Venczel then introduced the first speaker, Sir Liam Donaldson, and asked him to kick-off the presentations for the twenty-second PPG meeting.

Co-Chair H.E. Ambassador Marc Bichler of Luxembourg joined the meeting after Sir Liam's presentation, welcomed participants once again, and echoed the above sentiments from Dr. Venczel. As this was Ambassador Bichler's last PPG meeting as co-chair, he expressed his pleasure and privilege to be part of this committed group and reflected on the learnings from the experience and engaging discussions around the table. Ambassador Bichler reiterated that 2023 has been a crucial year in the implementation of the Polio Eradication Strategy 2022-2026: delivering on a promise. He reaffirmed that while we have seen

considerable progress in the last few years, continued common efforts towards the finish line are needed. He noted that stopping transmission of Polio cases will only be possible if eradication programs can overcome persistent social, economic, and political challenges. It was emphasized that this year, unfortunately, marks yet another record year for global humanitarian relief efforts, with 363 million people in need of humanitarian assistance, a staggering increase of 40 million people from last year. The security context in which health workers operate remains of big concern. This affects how they can reach key populations, such as through house-to-house campaigns. Public health is increasingly under pressure due to armed conflicts and humanitarian crises. Countries affected by Polio are also dealing with multiple, often competing health priorities. Ambassador Bichler noted that through his capacity as Member of the Human Rights Council, he continues to see the importance of access to basic health services as a human right, an inalienable right that belongs to everyone. He emphasized that until every child is protected, our collective efforts remain crucial. Ambassador Bichler then asked the plenary to keep in mind the people at the heart of this matter during the meeting - those whose lives are most affected by the convergence of these challenges. He concluded by asking that we strive for innovative, practical solutions that can alleviate suffering and build resilience in the face of an uncertain future. He highlighted that there's no doubt that the dedication, passion, and expertise gathered virtually through the meeting will contribute to our collective understanding and inspire new approaches to address this pressing issue.

Recommendations from IMB/TIMB Report: Sir Liam Donaldson, Chair of IMB and TIMB

After the initial introduction to the meeting, Sir Liam Donaldson, Chair of the IMB and TIMB, gave an enlightening presentation on the findings from the IMB's 22nd report: "[Closing in on Zero- Adapting to Complexity and Risk on the Path to End Polio](#)". Sir Liam began his presentation by specifically calling out that while global efforts have made huge inroads towards Polio eradication, boycotts and humanitarian crises are continuing to restrict these efforts. Next, he outlined progress towards the GPEI's Global Goals. For Goal 1, it was noted that the goal of ending wild polio by 2023 will be missed. While in theory, wild Poliovirus could be interrupted, it is still actively transmitting, and he highlighted that the path to stopping cases in South Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan for example, was complicated and yet unclear. For Goal 2, he noted that eradicating vaccine derived polio will, unfortunately, also be missed. Sir Liam emphasized that the situation for Goal 2 remains too complex, and too many countries continue to be affected. The presentation then outlined the risks for wild poliovirus and vaccine-derived poliovirus for 2024 (categorized as either "showstoppers" and "setbacks"). In this section of the presentation, Sir Liam walked the plenary through the polioviruses paralyzing children in 28 countries (674 confirmed cases between 1 August 2022 to 31 July 2023) the majority of which are vaccine derived. Sir Liam also highlighted Afghanistan's puzzling vaccination history in this section, explaining why campaigns appear ineffective, and highlighting the importance of ensuring there is excellent management of polio eradication campaigns. Finally, continued efforts towards polio eradication were highlighted, including the need to push forward with water and sanitation efforts. Sir Liam closed out his presentation by outlining the recommended actions and next steps, including GPEI's response to the outlined risks and responses. He emphasized that, most importantly, a focus is needed on improved funding and a targeted approach in regions experiencing humanitarian crises.

Polio Eradication Situational Update/Recommended Use of Various Polio Containing Vaccines: Arshad Qudus, Head of Detection and Interruption Unit in the Polio Eradication Department, World Health Organization

Next, Arshad Quddus, Head of the Detection, and Interruption Unit in the Polio Eradication Department at the WHO, walked the plenary through the Polio Eradication Strategy from 2022-26. He highlighted that the mid-term review of the strategy just concluded via the IMB's 22nd report (as detailed in the previous and complementary presentation by Sir Liam). Dr. Quddus highlighted progress against Global Goal 1 by outlining progress via maps and visuals of Malawi-Mozambique, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. Next, he reviewed country-specific progress pertaining to Goal 2: providing a cVDPV2 global overview in DRC, Nigeria, Yemen, and Somalia, which represent over 70% of global cases. He noted that for cVDPV1, there have been 14 outbreaks from 12 emergencies across 10 countries in the previous reporting period. Dr. Quddus also pointed out that these are locations where poor routine immunization continues to occur. He then noted that while there is a downward trend in cases overall, it needs to be accelerated. The presentation then continued by looking at endemics versus consequential geographies, with Kandahar as a highlighted affected region ongoing concern. It was mentioned that the WHO and partner organizations are acutely focused on implementing IMB recommendations based on priority and will likely have a continued impact on interruption goals. Dr. Quddus then reiterated the importance of maintaining intensity and momentum within GPEI to this end, as well as stopping the transmission at the source at the most consequential geographies. The presentation was concluded by echoing Sir Liam's sentiments on the importance of resourcing for implementation and ongoing commitment within and beyond GPEI. Dr. Quddus flagged that there is a planned meeting in November 2023 on Goal 2 and budgeting, which is scheduled to be reverted to the POB in Q2 2024 as fully costed plan. Finally, Dr. Quddus acknowledged the incredible work that has been done over the last few years, with 820 million doses of nOPV2 administered in 35 countries since March of 2021 making a huge difference in the fight against Poliovirus. He closed by noting that nothing can be done without the dedication of frontline workers and thanked them for their continued service.

Progress and Major Priorities for Polio Transition to be Successful: Ebru Ekeman, Policy Lead, WHO

Our final PPG presentation was conducted by Ebru Ekeman, who is the Policy Lead at WHO focused on Polio transition. Ebru began by outlining the post-2023 strategic direction for polio transition and post-certification, noting that "transition" is a controversial term and perhaps misrepresentation of the work being done, as the WHO's commitment to polio eradication remains resolute. She noted that the strategy was developed via two independent evaluations, with 10 discreet recommendations being determined. Ebru acknowledged that we've been discussing transition for over 10 years in some situations, but we are now currently looking at the global plan with several regional action plans in development. [The Global Vision](#) is being presented to the executive board imminently and is linked here for reference. Ms. Ekeman then presented the Post-2023 Strategic Framework: Vision, Strategic, and Operational Outcomes. Some of the Strategic Outcomes included immunization, surveillance, epidemic preparedness and response, and containment. Operational Outcomes include governance, performance, finance, and intermediate transition. Next, Ebru talked to the PPG plenary about accountability after the GPEI sunsets. To this end, the transition team is following TIMB recommendations closely, with highlights including rebranding of transition to make polio/non-polio outcomes clearer; new multi-partnership organization responsible for coordination and oversight (5-year life span include donors, led by management team in WHO/POL); POB decision to transfer cVDPV outbreak response responsibility to the WHO in 2024, and development of a monitoring and accountability framework.

Discussion & Time for Questions

With the conclusion of our expert presentations, the co-chairs then opened the floor for discussion. Several thought-provoking questions were raised by participants of the virtual plenary, which were then discussed in turn by the panelists and co-chairs.

Concluding Remarks

Dr Linda Venczel then began the closing remarks in the same way that the PPG meeting began by asking what members of the PPG can do to support the recommendations from the IMB/TIMB. She noted that it had been a vibrant and meeting and left a lot on the table for attendees to act upon together to accelerate advocacy and financing for the polio eradication movement while continuing to support endemic and outbreak countries, especially those being impacted by conflict-affected areas. She then thanked all the meeting participants for their ideas, comments, concerns, as well as their hopes in this critical phase of polio eradication. She noted that the PPG is working on determining a date for the next meeting, which will likely take place in Q2 of 2024. Finally, she asked that the plenary please consider supporting the PPG by helping identify a strong technical co-chair, as this was her last PPG meeting as co-chair.

Ambassador Bichler then provided final closing remarks, beginning by thanking Dr Linda Venczel for her good cooperation and friendship during their co-chairship over the past two years. He reiterated the invitation for colleagues to share their interest in taking over this wonderful group. Ambassador Bichler stressed that Luxembourg remains a strong supporter of the Polio response and remains committed, through numerous partnerships and contributions on a global scale. He noted the importance of providing flexible and predictable funding to WHO to ensure that the progress made in Polio eradication can be seen through to an end while sustaining WHO's capacity to respond to future and ongoing global health challenges. Finally, he noted that while the public health domain faces several challenges, we should not forget that important discussions are taking place in the Global Health agenda, to agree towards a first ever Pandemic treaty until spring next year. Ambassador Bichler then officially closed the meeting, and thanked participants once again for their participation, devotion, and expertise.