

3 July 2020

Dear polio eradication supporter,

Since I last wrote to you much has happened. An unprecedented pandemic has brought struggle and loss but also extraordinary global solidarity and innovation. Following the decision of the Polio Oversight Board (POB) to pause polio vaccine campaigns, thousands of polio workers have joined others in the fight against COVID-19, building on years of experience in surveillance for polioviruses, communications and data management. Polio social mobilizers have provided communities with information, polio labs have turned their expertise and infrastructure to COVID-19 testing, and the logistical capacities of polio programmes are being utilized to assist the pandemic response in the remotest areas and in humanitarian emergency settings.

Last month we heard from Mohamed - a member of the Somalia polio surveillance team, now also working on COVID-19 surveillance. "What gives me hope that we will succeed in the COVID-19 response is when I look behind us and I see what we have achieved with polio eradication, and the impact we've had on so many lives," says Mohamed. "We face everything, and we overcome it."

In March, POB members agreed it was important to continue essential polio functions during the pause in vaccination campaigns. Countries such as Somalia have been striving to maintain surveillance for polio virus, and work has continued to enable



Polio programme staff are conducting disease surveillance for COVID-19 as well as educating communities on the symptoms of the virus, how to prevent transmission, and how to report suspected cases.
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the rollout of the nOPV2 vaccine later in the year. GPEI has also been working on improvements to our internal governance and management, and I look forward to discussing these, and our strategic priorities, at the virtual Polio Oversight Board Meeting later this year.

Fundraising has also continued, and I would like to thank donors for their continued support during this period. Some have already started to operationalize commitments made in Abu Dhabi in November 2019. Special thanks go to Canada, which announced its new multi-year commitment to polio eradication, and Rotary International, which has just approved funding for polio campaigns in the second half of this year.

On 22 May, Henrietta Fore, Seth Berkeley and I briefed the media on the impact that COVID-19 has had on essential immunization. This was driven by our concern that the COVID-19 pandemic was unravelling many of the gains made in vaccination, with at least 80 million children under one at increased risk of diseases such as diphtheria, measles and polio.

As Executive Director Fore stated during the briefing: "We cannot let our fight against one disease come at the expense of long-term progress in our fight against other diseases. We have effective vaccines against measles, polio and cholera. While circumstances may require us to temporarily pause some immunization efforts, these immunizations must restart as soon as possible, or we risk exchanging one deadly outbreak for another." The inspiring response of donors at the Global Vaccine Summit in London was a demonstration of the extraordinary international commitment to sustain and further expand efforts to prevent diseases and save lives through immunization.

GPEI is now working with countries to plan the resumption of polio immunization campaigns, determine whether and when to hold a campaign, and how to do so to safely with appropriate infection prevention control measures in the context of COVID-19 transmission. We are encouraging countries to look at ways to operate in an integrated manner, using the opportunity of polio campaigns to deliver

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In Afghanistan, 3,750 polio social mobilizers are contributing to the COVID-19 response.

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other health services and vaccines to underserved and marginalized communities. In this context, communication with communities in the planning of campaigns is of paramount importance to ensure that we understand their needs and concerns and help address them to the best of our ability.

Outbreak response and immunization campaigns will be priorities in the last two endemic countries, Pakistan and Afghanistan, starting as early as next month. Central to all planning will be to ensure that front line workers and the communities they serve are able to protect themselves against COVID-19, and making sure that the necessary infection control parameters are in place.

While we plan for a resumption of vaccination campaigns, the polio programme will not step back from our commitment to play our part in the COVID-19 response for as long as needed.

But at the same time, we cannot step away from the achievements of the last 30 years.

This month saw an important milestone added to these achievements. The African Regional Certification Commission for Poliomyelitis Eradication (ARCC) reviewed and accepted evidence from Cameroon, the Central African Republic, Nigeria and South Sudan supporting their wild poliovirus-free status. This means all 47 countries of the WHO African Region have been granted polio-free status, paving the way for certification of the region's polio free status later this year.

When we celebrate the victory over polio in the WHO African region, it will be thanks to the commitment of thousands of polio workers around the world such as Mohamed. As Mohamed said: "We face everything, and we overcome it."

Yours faithfully,

Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus
Chair of the Polio Oversight Board

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