

17 December 2019

Dear polio eradication supporter,

This was a sobering year for us in the polio eradication movement. Wild poliovirus continued to paralyze children in Pakistan and Afghanistan, and circulating vaccine-derived poliovirus proved a canny and underestimated foe in many countries with weak immunity. As we end the year, close to 300 children have been paralyzed by these two viruses, in 19 countries. The last mile is the hardest mile in any marathon. The marathon to end polio has proven no different.

In November, I witnessed the highs and lows of our current condition, and clear signposts for the road ahead. The first was during the Reaching the Last Mile Forum, hosted by the

Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, His Highness Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan. During this gathering, he and Bill Gates co-hosted a polio pledging moment. In the space of 30 minutes, affected countries and donors pledged firm political and operational commitments, coupled with US\$ 2.6 billion towards polio eradication. I was inspired by their combined dedication in this demanding stretch of our marathon. And I was both inspired and humbled by the front line health workers honoured with REACH awards, one of whom, Nigeria's Rahane Lawal, endured kidnapping and violence in her quest to end polio – and still perseveres.



After this high point, we held the Polio Oversight Board meeting, where for the first time we included country governments and together examined the thorniest challenges now facing us and mapped out the road ahead. In Pakistan, the Minister himself has led thorough reviews and redesign of the programme. Now there is clearer, unified command of the programme, and a new non-partisan strategic advisory group which includes previous Prime Minister's focal persons from different parties. Afghanistan, facing unique access challenges as well as the need to efficiently meet community needs, outlined scenarios for varying levels of access and ways to respond to broader health needs and ensure engagement.

On circulating vaccine-derived poliovirus, I said in my last letter that we were seeking guidance from the scientific community. I am pleased to tell you that following these discussions and intense programmatic planning based on the current science, we are finalizing a new strategy for this insidious exploiter of weak immunization systems. This strategy spans new tactics for sustainably strengthening routine immunization, rapid detection and response. Underpinning this is a sense of urgency. Polio eradication is a Public Health Emergency of International Concern and these outbreaks take the level of emergency even higher. We have a dedicated cross-agency group to streamline work on rapid development of a genetically-stable vaccine and its emergency use, so that vaccine-derived poliovirus becomes history. In a few days, this strategy will be online for comment; in

January, we will present it to WHO Member States.

We talked about the way ahead for integration, too. Communities are tired of multiple vaccination campaigns. Integrating polio vaccination into broader health interventions and development programmes such as water and sanitation will make things easier on communities – a sort of 'bundle'. In Pakistan and Afghanistan, small and local collaborations between polio and other sectors have delivered other health services. The GPEI Hub in Amman includes a function dedicated to supporting integration. The polio system knows where the least-served children are and how to reach them. Now we need the wider health system to reach them with more than polio vaccine.

With this hard year behind us, and the roadmap for the way ahead, I look forward to 2020. Frontline health workers like our colleague Dr Ujala Nayyar of Pakistan strive every day to overcome the final obstacles – whether they be operational, social or scientific. That's what we have to set our sights on. Ujala said it best at the polio pledging moment: "We risk reversing hard-won gains if we lose sight of the endgame."

Now is not the time to despair: now is the time to summon our strength and resolve and push through. On 20 November, we marked 30 years since the world adopted the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Let us fulfil our promise to future generations of children.

Yours faithfully,



Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus  
Chair of the Polio Oversight Board

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