
CHAIRS' STATEMENT

18th High-Level Virtual Meeting of the Global Polio Partners Group

15.00-17.30 CET, Wednesday, 28 April 2021

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

On 28 April 2021, the Polio Partners Group (PPG) of the Global Polio Eradication Initiative (GPEI) convened the eighteenth semiannual high-level meeting of polio stakeholders over Zoom. The meeting was attended by over 70 representatives from core GPEI partners, stakeholders from governments at the ambassadorial, senior official, and technical level, and from international organizations, foundations, and donors.

Opening Remarks

Co-chair Ambassador Sally Mansfield (Australia) welcomed meeting participants and stressed that the global community cannot allow polio to be forgotten amidst other emergencies caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Co-chair Dr. Linda Venczel of PATH welcomed participants and echoed these sentiments, underscoring that the global community is at a critical juncture between recovering from COVID-19 and regaining ground on the fight against polio.

Update on Key Polio Oversight Board Decisions

Rotary International Representative, Michael McGovern, offered an update on key recent Polio Oversight Board (POB) decisions. Stressing that each member of the POB remains steadfast in their support for the fight against polio amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, McGovern noted that strategic revisions had been needed to address program setbacks. A review process began in July 2020, with 300 stakeholders split into eight working groups with technical experts. While the final plan (The Polio Strategy: 2021–2026) is still under revision, a draft will be shared in June with the POB and other stakeholders, and an executive summary of the revised strategic plan is available [here](#).

The revised strategy for polio eradication has two main goals and five objectives. The primary goal is to permanently interrupt all poliovirus transmission in endemic countries; the secondary goal is to stop vaccine-derived poliovirus (cVDPV) transmission and prevent polio outbreaks in non-endemic regions. McGovern enumerated the objectives to be achieved in pursuit of these goals: (1) political advocacy to increase government ownership; (2) fostering community engagement to drive demand for vaccines; (3) improvement of polio immunization campaigns to increase quality of planning and implementation; (4) integrate polio eradication initiatives with other health programs to reach more children; and (5) expand surveillance for polio and other vaccine-preventable diseases. The estimated cost of this plan is USD\$5.3 billion, underscoring the crucial need for continued donor support. The main drivers of cost are surveillance, outbreak response and preventative campaigns, integrated health services, vaccine supply, and staffing.

There are several shifts in the revised strategy. McGovern emphasized a need to re-establish polio eradication as a public health emergency. Acknowledging but not dwelling on decreased rates of detected polio cases, McGovern underscored that this moment presents the best chance the global community has for eradicating polio. Doing so, McGovern said, would involve holding governments, agencies, and global partners accountable to their commitments and require self and independent evaluation and continuous improvement. A revitalized polio eradication strategy would also involve improving community engagement by balancing capacity and decision-making between the United Nations headquarters and regional and country teams. McGovern shared a timeline from 2021 to 2026 to highlight milestones and indicated expectations of accountability.

In addition to discussing the new strategy for polio eradication, McGovern shared developments in the governance and management of the GPEI. Donor representatives will be added to the POB, Finance and Audit Committee, and Strategy Committee. More broadly, McGovern indicated that changes to the GPEI management structure shall be made.

McGovern expressed solemn gratitude for the front-line workers in polio vaccination campaigns, honoring the three workers who were killed during a vaccination campaign in Afghanistan in March 2021. This sentiment was echoed by other participants in the PPG throughout the continuation of discussion. Sincere desires to deescalate tensions between frontline workers, antigovernment elements (AGEs), and national governments were also expressed. The safety, support and recognition of these polio champions is a top priority for the program and its supporters.

Programmatic and Strategic Updates

Director for Polio Eradication (World Health Organization) Aidan O’Leary, Minister of Health (Pakistan) Dr. Fasil Sultan, and Chair of the GPEI Independent Monitoring Board Sir Liam Donaldson, each contributed to programmatic and strategic updates.

Each speaker acknowledged the setbacks caused by the several-months-long pause in polio eradication activities in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as challenges in traveling the “last yard” to reach children who are routinely missed by vaccination campaigns. Although the 2021 surveillance data shows encouraging reductions in cases of Wild Polio Virus, O’Leary stressed the importance of reaching the core reservoirs that are currently missed due to structural barriers. O’Leary stressed that because the center of polio transmission in Afghanistan has moved from a partially accessible region to the less accessible southern region, technical and vaccine innovations alone will not be sufficient to achieve GPEI’s objectives. Sir Donaldson echoed these sentiments and stressed that the next critical steps in polio eradication will have to involve collaboration with political stakeholders and communities. He stressed the precarity of a situation in which the polio vaccine is more valuable as a political weapon than a public health intervention. Dr. Sultan emphasized the commitment of all levels of Pakistani leadership with polio eradication efforts and stressed the importance of microplanning and meeting community-specific needs.

In addition to recognizing the need to engage politically with both state and anti-government actors, speakers underscored the potential for progress through the empowerment of local governments and communities. Leveraging local creativity is key to finding solutions at a granular level, according to Sir Donaldson. Other speakers emphasized that community involvement and the strengthening of routine immunization are critical to the long-term goals of polio eradication rather than short-term vertical responses.

O’Leary described the promise of the nOPV2 vaccine for which the World Health Organization emergency use listing has been granted. Currently, 27 countries have requested readiness for nOPV use assessments, and five

countries had been verified as ready to use it. O'Leary cautioned against placing too much emphasis on biotechnological developments alone and highlighted the need for high-quality campaigns. Dr. Sultan presented the opportunity to leverage lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic response for revitalizing polio eradication efforts.

Discussion

Ambassador Mansfield asked stakeholders and partners for their perspectives on the role and utility of PPG. Stakeholders and partners who contributed to the discussion appeared to agree over the value of the PPG as an overarching forum. A number of participants underscored the value of the PPG as a platform for enabling a broad group of stakeholders to provide perspectives on GPEI. McGovern said the POB welcomed the input of the PPG - it provides an important avenue for communication between the POB, donors and other stakeholders. Ambassador Mansfield observed that the PPG is a forum that adds value because it brings donors, key stakeholders, and technical experts together in the same room. The potential added value of the PPG on the political and diplomatic front was also highlighted. Lee Losey, of the CORE Group Polio Project, added that a diplomatic solution may be necessary in the current state of polio eradication, and that a room of ambassadors, such as the one provided by the PPG, may encourage the development of such solutions.

Others emphasized the importance of integration as a critical approach in the intermediate term. Understanding the security challenges in endemic countries and anticipating a disruption of activities when the US troops leave Afghanistan in September 2021 would also be critical. There was also discussion on strategic issues including the political challenges to eradication, and the need for cVDPV outbreak response efforts to bring outbreaks under control while also contributing to strengthening prevention and preparedness to mitigate the risk of future outbreaks. The importance of synergies between polio eradication efforts, including work to strengthen surveillance systems and routine immunization and efforts to address other vaccine-preventable diseases was also noted.

The critical nature of integration was underscored, as both a way to achieve polio eradication and to ensure that the polio legacy can benefit broader public health programs. Integration would contribute to progress towards universal access to immunization programs and help to leverage local ownership of polio eradication activities. The Senior Advisor to the Minister of Public Health (Afghanistan) and National Emergency Operations Center Coordinator, Dr. Rashidi, suggested that the delivery of integrated services was the only solution for progressing polio eradication in inaccessible areas of Afghanistan. Global partners and stakeholders in polio eradication continued to focus on liaising with AGEs to secure access. Dr. Rashidi stressed that the Taliban authorities were supportive of integrated services and stronger health systems and have collaborated with the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation on the development of 72 health facilities.

Concern was expressed by several stakeholders and partners over the security issues in polio-endemic areas. Dr. Rashidi noted that the Afghani government experienced many problems getting access to AGE-controlled areas. UN Foundation Ambassador and Senior Fellow, John Lange, noted the political, security, and diplomatic dimensions of polio eradication were lacking in the current strategy and described how polio eradication was more of a security issue than a public health issue in the two remaining endemic countries. The situation would only be further complicated by the US withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan. McGovern and Ambassador Nasir Ahsman Andisha (Afghanistan) both stressed the necessity for polio eradication actors to work with AGEs.

There was discussion on the integration of polio vaccination campaigns and management. Some partners welcomed progress on integration but anticipated potential obstacles, including financial shortfalls, and the inherent difficulty of health system strengthening. Scheduling supplementary immunization activities in tandem

with other multiantigen campaigns could add value, and lessons learned from nPOV2 roll out should be replicated as they are identified. There were some concerns about frequent changes in plans and budgets. O’Leary said he had heard and understood the request from donors for greater engagement programmatic and strategic issues, including planned staffing changes at the HQ and country levels. A meeting has been scheduled for 5 May 2021 to discuss polio transition with would touch on these changes. He committed to further enhancing communication with donors.

Meeting Closure

In closing, Ambassador Mansfield and Dr. Venczel noted the keen interest in pushing forward with polio eradication efforts across the PPG. How polio programs are delivered should change in response to lessons learned on better engaging with the communities in areas where transmission continues and how to overcome barriers to effective integration. Budget prioritization and financing challenges will also need to be addressed. Dr. Venczel stressed the importance of doubling down of efforts to reach less accessible areas and facilitate community involvement in multiantigen campaigns. She also reiterated the importance of working with Expanded Program on Immunization programs, navigating the political challenges in the remaining endemic countries, empowering local ideas and creativity, and returning to a focus on basic trust and engagement.