

Polio: Reaching the hardest to reach

Eradicating polio will need continued UK leadership on global health.

Humanity is on the verge of one of the greatest public health accomplishments in history: eradicating polio. In 1988, there were 350,000 cases of wild polio from 125 countries. In 2018, there were 33 from just two countries. Despite this incredible progress, we have yet to stop transmission in the most difficult-to-reach areas in the world, and the detection of even a single polio case anywhere shows that vaccination is still needed. But the last few steps will be the hardest. Polio exists in the smallest geographic area in history, but that includes some of the most difficult-to-reach areas in the world. Failure to eradicate polio could lead to a global resurgence of the disease with as many as 200,000 new cases expected every year, within 10 years, all over the world.

The UK Government has long been a leader on global public health, contributing to the Global Polio Eradication Initiative (GPEI), as well as supporting other vital global health funds. The UK provided a total of £400 million between 2013 and 2018, and UK support has made up 10% of its funding over the last 30 years. The GPEI has recently developed a new strategy to drive progress to a polio free world over the next five years. Please write to new DFID Minister Dr. Andrew Murrison MP, asking him to continue the UK's global health leadership by pledging an additional £400 million to the GPEI's work, as part of the UK's commitment to Universal Health Coverage.

What is Polio?

Polio is a highly infectious, viral disease that mainly affects children under the age of 5. It invades the nervous system and causes irreversible paralysis within hours, and it can kill. Although safe and effective vaccines exist, there is no cure. In the early 20th century, polio paralysed hundreds of thousands of children every year and [was one of the most feared diseases](#) in industrialised countries such as the United States and United Kingdom.

In 2018 and 2019, new polio cases were only recorded in two countries, Afghanistan and Pakistan, and humanity is on the verge of one of the greatest public health accomplishments in history: eradicating polio. In 1988, there were 350,000 annual cases of wild polio from 125 countries. In 2018, there were 33 from two, and we are 99.99% of the way to eradicating the virus.

Despite this incredible progress, we have yet to stop transmission of the virus in the most difficult-to-reach areas in the world, and the detection of even a single polio case anywhere points to remaining vaccination coverage gaps which must be filled. The nature of polio is such that one carrier of the disease can cause an epidemic in a remarkably short amount of time. It only takes one missed village for the virus to survive and

circulate around the globe. Therefore it is important to continue to provide the resources needed to eradicate polio from its last remaining strongholds, without which, within 10 years we could see as many as 200,000 new cases every year, all over the world, and decades of work and investment would be wasted.

The Global Polio Eradication Initiative (GPEI)

The [Global Polio Eradication Initiative](#) (GPEI) is the body charged with eradicating polio. GPEI has ensured over 2.5 billion children have been vaccinated against polio and has led the world in driving down the number of polio cases worldwide. In May, the GPEI launched a [comprehensive, long-term strategy](#) to deliver a polio-free world, and currently works [in some of the most difficult places in the world](#). Conflict and insecurity have been a great obstacle in reaching all children, especially those currently most at risk from polio and other vaccine preventable diseases. However, due to the courageous work of health workers, huge strides have been made towards the elimination of polio.

Since the WHO declared eradication of polio a global target in 1988, we have seen cases reduce dramatically, but even with enormous and commendable global efforts, the difficulty of reaching the very last few children with vaccines has meant that the last steps will be the hardest.

Through the effort to reach every last child with polio vaccines, the GPEI's extensive infrastructure has also delivered other critical health interventions, multiplying the impact of money put toward the eradication effort. In many countries affected by or at risk of polio, GPEI staff are the single largest source of expertise on immunisation.

What is the UK's role in polio eradication?

The UK has been at the forefront of polio eradication since the formation of the GPEI in 1988, and UK support has made up 10% of its funding over the last 30 years. It pledged £300 million towards polio eradication for the period 2013-2019, and thanks in part to your campaigning, then Secretary of State Priti Patel announced an additional £100 million in August 2017. A big thank you to everyone who has helped make this happen, including those of you who asked your MP to become a '[polio champion](#).'

Building global health brick by brick

The UK's aid programme supports the goal of Universal Health Coverage (UHC) in multiple ways, including significant investments not only in GPEI but also Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, TB and Malaria, and 'Nutrition for Growth' (N4G). Gavi, the GPEI and the Global Fund are increasingly working together to accelerate progress towards Global Goal 3 (good health and wellbeing). The funds should now work closer than ever with each other, to improve progress toward health for all, and collectively support sustainable and stronger health systems. Over the next 18 months, we must ensure that [all the bricks of the global health infrastructure are fully financed](#) and able to support each other. A strong UK commitment to the GPEI will be integral to delivering universal immunisation coverage on the path towards strong essential healthcare services to help deliver UHC.

What is needed now?

For the GPEI to overcome the remaining challenges of eradication, ensure that every child is reached, and to ensure the world reaches and maintains a polio free status, new funding commitments are needed. To implement the new GPEI strategy, \$3.27 billion needs to be raised.

A pledging conference in Abu Dhabi in November will give donors the chance to continue the vital work of the GPEI. The UK's ongoing commitment to leaving no one behind, tackling extreme poverty, and strengthening health care systems (especially in fragile states) will be crucial to addressing the challenges standing in the way of a polio-free world.

New DFID Minister the Rt. Hon. Dr. Andrew Murrison MP has the responsibility for DFID's global health work, and in the run-up to the pledging conference, it will be vital that the ministerial team is fully supportive of the work of the GPEI and the other global health funds. We are asking the UK to invest £400 million in polio eradication, through the GPEI, to help reach every child with the polio vaccine as part of comprehensive immunisation systems – a vital building block of sustainable health systems.

Over the next few months, sustained political will for the various global health funds will be needed, especially in the face of turbulent UK politics. It will be important to start building this political will now, before the summer parliamentary recess, expected at the end of July, and the Minister needs to see strong public support polio eradication.

This month, please ask Dr. Murrison to invest £400 million in the GPEI, to help eradicate polio for good and achieve health for all.

Take action!

This month, please ask new DFID Minister Dr. Andrew Murrison MP to commit £400 million to the Global Polio Eradication Initiative, to help eradicate polio for good and achieve health for all. Please explain your personal reasons for supporting the fight against polio, and explain how vaccinations for diseases like polio are a vital building block of sustainable health systems and achieving health for all.

Contact details: Rt. Hon. Dr. Andrew Murrison MP, Minister of State, Department for International Development, 22 Whitehall, London SW1A 2EG. Email: DFIDCorrespondence@dfid.gov.uk

Please let the Campaigns team know that you've taken action by emailing Dela at delanderson@results.org.uk.