

Finishing the fight to end polio

Help ensure the UK continues to help eradicate this debilitating childhood disease.

Polio is a debilitating and often fatal childhood disease that once blighted tens of thousands of lives worldwide, but in recent decades has been 99% eradicated. Wild polio now exists in only two countries; yet it is highly infectious and without continued vaccination campaigns and ongoing global monitoring, we risk a resurgence.

The COVID-19 pandemic temporarily halted many polio vaccination programmes; however, health workers and volunteers from the Global Polio Eradication Initiative (GPEI) were able to support local health systems battle the pandemic, and now, although efforts to vaccinate populations worldwide against COVID-19 have a very long way to go, polio eradication work is again progressing even in the hardest to reach parts of Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The UK has long been a leading donor to GPEI, and in 2019 committed to spending £400 million for the period 2020-2023, which would help vaccinate more than 750 children a minute against polio in low- and middle-income countries around the world and help support 20 million health workers and volunteers. However, the cuts to the UK's Official Development Assistance (ODA) budget reduced UK support to polio eradication by around 95% in 2021. It is vital that the Government honours the commitment that it has made. This month, please write to the Foreign Secretary, Rt. Hon. Liz Truss MP, informing her of the UK's vital place in global polio eradication efforts, which could help to end polio forever.

Polio – a disease almost but not quite gone forever

Polio is a life-threatening disease caused by a very contagious virus. Its most severe symptom is paralysis, which can lead to permanent disability or death if the virus affects the muscles that help people breathe. There is no cure for polio, and in the early 20th century, polio was [one of the most feared diseases in industrialized countries](#), paralysing hundreds of thousands of children every year. With the introduction of [effective vaccines](#) in the 1950s and 1960s, however, polio was brought under control and practically eliminated as a public health problem.

However, polio remained a major problem in low- and middle-income countries and during the 1970s, routine immunisation was introduced worldwide as part of national vaccination programmes to control the disease. When the [Global Polio Eradication Initiative](#) (GPEI) was established in 1988, polio paralysed more than 1,000 children worldwide every day. Since then, more than 2.5 billion children have been immunised against polio thanks to the cooperation of more than 200 countries and 20 million volunteers, and more than 19 million cases have been averted in total. Today, global incidence of polio cases has decreased by 99%. The last detected case of polio in the Americas Region was in 1991, and Africa was declared wild polio-free in

2020 after 4 years without a case. The wild polio virus is now endemic (regularly infecting people) in only two countries in the world, Afghanistan and Pakistan. However, it is highly infectious and without continued vaccination and ongoing global monitoring, we risk a resurgence across international borders.

What is the Global Polio Eradication Initiative?

The Global Polio Eradication Initiative (GPEI) is a public-private partnership led by national governments with six core partners – the World Health Organization (WHO), Rotary International, US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance. Its goal is to eradicate polio worldwide.

The COVID-19 pandemic and vaccination programmes

The COVID-19 pandemic temporarily halted many vaccination programmes around the world, including polio vaccination campaigns. However, GPEI staff and volunteers were able to [support local health systems](#) battle COVID-19, and now, although efforts to vaccinate populations worldwide against COVID-19 still have a very long way to go, polio eradication work is once more progressing even in the hardest to reach parts of Afghanistan and Pakistan.

In Afghanistan, with the agreement of the Taliban, [polio vaccination restarted](#) in November 2021, including more than 3.3 million children in some parts of the country who had previously been inaccessible to vaccination campaigns. Restarting polio vaccination is crucial for preventing any significant resurgence of polio within the country and mitigating the risk of cross-border and international transmission.

Supporting resilient health systems

Polio eradication programmes conduct outreach activities in communities that [also deliver other life-saving vaccinations](#), contributing to more robust health systems. This means that the GPEI should continue to be a priority for the UK Government, both to contribute to the delivery of essential life-saving vaccinations, and to help protect people against COVID-19 and future pandemics, as part of its commitment to [ending preventable child deaths by 2030](#).

With the world gearing up for the unprecedented challenge of rolling out COVID-19 vaccines in every country, we must build an effective global system for pandemic response to ensure everyone has access to effective healthcare. The existing polio infrastructure was designed to detect and eradicate all polioviruses and has been proven to work in even the most challenging environments. GPEI serves as an effective epidemic response programme in dozens of countries, responding to health emergencies that a regular health system may struggle to address alone. An investment in GPEI is therefore not only an investment in a polio-free world, but an investment in ending the COVID-19 pandemic, and in strong health systems.

The UK's support for polio eradication

The UK has a long history supporting the GPEI. In 2019, then Development Secretary Alok Sharma committed

to spending £400 million for the period 2020-2023, which would help vaccinate more than 750 children a minute against polio in low- and middle-income countries and help support 20 million health workers and volunteers. The UK is amongst a few donors to provide unrestricted funding (not restricted to a particular activity) that enables GPEI to be flexible in their work, as seen during their dynamic shift during the COVID-19 pandemic. It also enables forward planning and more effective work. However, cuts to the UK's Official Development Assistance (ODA) budget disproportionately reduced support to polio eradication by 95% in 2021 and only £75 million has been disbursed so far. This risks an enormous setback to the eradication effort at a critical moment, as GPEI will not be able to undertake planned activities.

Why take action on polio eradication now?

The Autumn Budget and Spending Review 2021 acknowledged the ongoing economic recovery and the UK's dedication to continue demonstrating leadership on challenges facing the world. Funding GPEI directly aligns with at least two of the seven key priorities for UK ODA in 2021-2022: COVID-19 and global health security; and humanitarian preparedness and response. And in December, the UK Government published a [policy paper](#) on Health Systems Strengthening stating that "a strong and inclusive health system is a foundation stone to achieving all health outcomes."

This month, we have the chance to inform new Foreign Secretary Liz Truss MP of the UK's vital role in global polio eradication efforts and wider health systems strengthening through GPEI, and ask the Government to recommit to the existing pledge to GPEI by spending £100 million a year for the remaining period of 2020-23.

Take action!

1. Please write to the Foreign Secretary, Rt. Hon. Liz Truss MP, informing her of the UK's vital place in global polio eradication efforts, and asking her to spend £100 million a year for the remaining period of 2020-23, which the Government has already committed to the Global Polio Eradication Initiative.

Contact details: Rt. Hon. Liz Truss MP, Secretary of State, Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, King Charles Street, London SW1A 2AH. Email fcdo.correspondence@fcdo.gov.uk

2. Share some of the social media assets in the [Background Sheet](#). You may want to organise a joint action meeting or a film screening in your group.

Let us know that you've taken this month's action by emailing Campaigns Coordinator Ruthie Walters at ruthie.walters@results.org.uk