

RESEARCH

POLIO ERADICATION: OVERCOMING THE FINAL BARRIERS AND ENSURING A LASTING LEGACY FOR HEALTH SYSTEMS

The world is closer than ever to eradicating polio, with only 72 cases of wild polio in 2015. Building on this, the Global Health Programme (GHP) at the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies in Geneva has launched a project to explore critical dimensions of the global effort to eradicate polio, focusing on overcoming the final barriers and ensuring a lasting legacy for health systems.

The Global Polio Eradication Initiative's (GPEI) Strategic Plan 2013–18 aims at delivering a polio-free world by 2018, at a cost of US\$ 5.5 billion over this period. However, due to the continuing wild polio transmission in two endemic countries (Pakistan and Afghanistan) another year and an additional US \$1.5 billion is currently projected to be necessary to finish the job in 2019.

The **gains in polio eradication** made to date are precarious and constantly at risk of being reversed. Failure to eradicate polio from the last remaining strongholds could result in as many as 200,000 new cases every year within a decade, all over the world. Achieving polio eradication not only requires meeting the financial needs of the GPEI Strategic Plan and diligent application of the well-established technical processes. Complex political, social, cultural and religious factors in the remaining disease-endemic countries – where there are civil conflicts, territorial disputes and high levels of distrust of authorities and of health workers – will determine whether interruption of all wild type virus transmission is achieved in the near future.

With the end of polio in sight, attention is shifting to the legacy provided by this momentous achievement – only the second time in history that a virus disease in humans will have been eradicated. The direct consequences of eradication will include the prevention every year of thousands of deaths and permanent paralysis of hundreds of thousands of people – especially children. This will yield up to at least US\$ 25 billion in net benefits over the next 20 years.

But the potential legacy goes far beyond this: the lessons learned from such a massive, long-sustained and highly organized campaign, the infrastructures, managerial systems and technical solutions developed; and the cadres of highly trained health workers, laboratory staff and community volunteers all represent an exceptionally valuable accumulation of resources and form a crucial cluster in the context of global health governance. These resources must not be lost once polio has disappeared – they must be conserved, marshalled and applied to tackle other pressing global health challenges, whether relating to the battle against other specific diseases or to the development of strong and effective health systems that are accessible to all in the movement for Universal Health Coverage that is now a target of the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals.

THE PROJECT AIMS

European countries and the European Commission have been important partners to the GPEI, providing not only funding, but also important political support. Their ongoing support to the implementation of the GPEI is key to the success of the polio eradication “endgame”.

This requirement comes at a time when the UN agreement on the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals is drawing the emphasis away from ‘vertical’ programmes addressing specific diseases and towards broader ambitions for health systems strengthening and universal health coverage.

This project aims to address and work with European decision makers to foster critical action on the global public good of polio eradication and ensure a lasting legacy for sustainable health systems.

Much can be learned from how polio eradication has been organized and executed at the country level that will help to inform and strengthen health systems capacities and public health initiatives. At the same time, there are aspects of the polio eradication legacy that relate directly to future global health, including relevance to disease-specific initiatives and to the governance of global health institutions and initiatives.

The project views the legacy of polio also in the broader context of ongoing and potential future programmes for the eradication of infectious diseases and will derive broader lessons relating to global health governance.

THE PROJECT APPROACH

This project involves parallel work streams to encourage the EU and European states to strengthen both their financial commitments and their application of diplomacy to address the social and political determinants of polio eradication. The GHP at the Graduate Institute has great experience in global health diplomacy and in engaging constructively with European and global health actors on sensitive issues through these types of dialogues.

Insights from a series of policy dialogues and roundtables in Europe’s hubs for health policy – including Geneva, Berlin, Brussels

and London – and an intensive research effort will be integrated to provide recommendations for European policy makers in relation to polio eradication and reaping the legacy. The following key topics will be, inter alia, tackled in the project activities: legacy and current challenges in overcoming the final barriers of polio eradication; polio eradication and sustaining routine vaccinations; governance and financial issues in a changing global context; transition legacy and the link to universal health coverage; and the importance of political support for the ‘endgame’ efforts.

Literature review: At the outset of the project, a detailed scan of both peer-reviewed and grey literature is focused on identifying funding trends and attitudes among GPEI supporters; information on country-specific political, social, cultural religious and civil conflict-related factors in endemic countries that may serve as barriers to polio eradication; and opportunities and challenges in maximising the polio eradication legacy.

Primary data collection: Plans, projected support for GPEI and attitudes of European supporters and potential supporters of polio eradication and its legacy follow-on will be probed through a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews that will be developed and analysed throughout the project.

Policy dialogues: The project will hold a series of dialogues with European political decision makers and thought leaders, including Ambassadors and Minister Counsellors from diplomatic missions, heads of departments of development agencies, experts from within the ministries of health and foreign affairs, directors of NGOs and think tanks, as well as leading academics, to discuss remaining barriers to polio eradication and linkages with a broader global health diplomacy agenda and, especially, the polio eradication legacy.

Writing and publications: Major outputs from the project will include the literature review, an openly accessible annotated bibliography, policy briefs, meeting reports and other research documents, as well as a final report with recommendations addressed to European policy makers.

Further details of the GHP Polio Project can be found on our website at: <http://graduateinstitute.ch/ghp/polio>

This project is funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.