

March, 2016

Dear Colleagues:

Polio partners recently held an informal meeting to take stock of the progress in Pakistan and Afghanistan and identify specific actions to accelerate progress.

I was impressed by the commitment and progress, particularly in Pakistan. At national, provincial, and district levels, top political and administrative officials are insisting on good performance. This bodes well, not only for eradicating polio, but also for improving other health programs, as long as momentum is sustained. The commitment of front-line staff in both countries, often in the face of difficult barriers, such as the threat of violence, is inspiring.



Social mobilizer conducts community workshop in Pakistan ©UNICEF

Reaching every child with life-saving polio vaccines to get the world over the finish line requires social mobilization and community engagement to bring together national and local government, religious leaders, and civil groups to understand communities' concerns and needs, provide information, and reduce hesitation to immunization. Within the Global Polio Eradication Initiative, UNICEF and Rotary International lead these strategies.

In Pakistan, continuous community-protected vaccination (CCPV) is a key strategy to reduce the number of unvaccinated children in high-risk districts. CCPV reaches 2 million children in the most difficult areas. Vaccinators who are part of CCPV use a detailed micro-census to identify and find children, who were missed during campaigns, to vaccinate between campaigns. Vaccinators are drawn from and vetted by the community, ensuring they are appropriate and accepted by the families they work to reach. CCPV fosters more engagement with the local government and community leaders and helps the polio program to better direct resources to where they are needed. Results are encouraging. As an example, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa has seen a 50 percent reduction in missed children in recent months. Because it has been so successful, this program is further expanding to Pakistan's polio reservoir areas of Peshawar-Khyber, Quetta, and Karachi by the end of this month.

Coordination between Afghanistan and Pakistan is critical, because of their shared border and daily cross-border movement. The countries are working together to reduce vaccine refusals and to immunize migrating populations. Afghanistan is vaccinating both incoming and outgoing children at border posts to minimize the likelihood that a child crossing between the two countries is missed. Polio partners are engaging community and religious leaders to become polio advocates through educational workshops, and social mobilizers are being placed at border crossing points to vaccinate more people on the move. The selection, training, and profile of social mobilizers and vaccinators are being prioritized to include local community leaders in Afghanistan's lowest performing districts to help increase community acceptance of vaccination.

The world is significantly closer to eradicating polio than ever before in human history, but eradication is not a foregone conclusion. Unless there is continued community engagement and accelerated program improvement, there is real risk that eradication will slip from our grasp, resulting in avoidable disability, paralysis, and deaths among children for years to come.

Thank you for what you do to protect the world's children.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Thomas R. Frieden".

Thomas R. Frieden, MD, MPH
Director, U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
Chairman, Polio Oversight Board