How the EU is leading the polio endgame

Written by Sajjad Karim on 24 April 2018 in Opinion

Opinion

With the continued support and leadership of the European Union, the eradication of polio is within our sights, writes Sajjad Karim.

The 17 Sustainable Development Goals are ambitious, but one ground-breaking initiative is bringing us closer to the day when this ambition will be matched by our achievements. With the continued support and leadership of the European Union in fighting polio, the eradication of a human disease for only the second time in history is within our sights.

Since the adoption of the European Parliament written declaration on polio eradication in June 2015, the number of cases of wild poliovirus detected in the world has drastically decreased from 359 cases in 2014 in nine countries, to just 22 cases in 2017 in three; Afghanistan, Pakistan and Nigeria. While great progress has been made to eradicate polio, it is critical that the EU sustains its leading role...
pursuing this goal.

On 25 April, the Rotary Polio Eradication Champion award ceremony will take place at the European Parliament, and the award will be presented to European international cooperation and development Commissioner Neven Mimica.

This ceremony is an opportunity for Rotary and its partners (the World Health Organisation, Unicef and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation) in the Global Polio Eradication Initiative (GPEI) to thank the EU for its continuing support of the historic effort to rid the world of polio and protect millions of children from death or life-long paralysis. It follows on from the recent EU pledge of €55m to the GPEI in June 2017 in Atlanta, Georgia.

This event will be co-hosted by myself and my colleague Pascal Arimont, who recognises the incredible progress that has been made in the fight against polio: “Following the European Parliament’s adopted written declaration on polio eradication and the European Commission’s subsequent pledge to provide an additional €55m to the polio programme, great progress has been made.

“Thanks to the EU’s ongoing support, the GPEI achieved first and foremost a drastic reduction in the number of polio cases, and is also now better equipped to monitor and understand the virus’ circulation.

“Since we are closer than ever to reaching the goal of full eradication, I would very much welcome if we could pursue the EU’s pledge by foreseeing the polio eradication programme in the next multiannual financial framework.”

Peter Iblher, Director of Rotary International, also sees the EU’s role as instrumental for the success of the world’s most ambitious public-private partnership for global health: “The $1.2bn of pledges made in Atlanta by generous and committed donors, including the EU, GPEI partners, endemic countries and new public and private sector donors, demonstrates what is possible when public and private institutions come together to improve children’s lives.”

Polio will be the second disease in history to be wiped out after smallpox, which was eradicated in 1980. Eradicating polio will be one of the greatest public health achievements of all time and will represent a milestone towards the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. Polio eradication will also ensure that every child will be able to look forward to a life without the fear of polio.

To prevent outbreaks in the future, the GPEI and its partners are investing in strengthening health systems, maintaining and improving surveillance systems, and training health workers in regions and countries at risk, mostly in Africa and Asia.

The GPEI is also supporting countries as they develop and implement transition plans to transfer expertise, tangible assets and lessons learned from the polio programme to benefit other health challenges and emergencies.

The initiative is already creating a legacy of infrastructure and partnerships that will support the fight against infectious disease long after polio is gone. An estimated one-third of the ‘cold chain’ capacity to distribute vaccines in sub-Saharan Africa was created by as a result of the polio eradication programme.

The influence of the GPEI can also be credited for what the World Health Organisation described as Nigeria’s ‘world-class’ public health response to thwart the Ebola virus in 2014.
When Ebola struck, Nigeria was prepared, thanks to the existing infrastructure that was developed to fight polio, with cutting-edge GPS and surveillance technology to track cases, a network of laboratories to test blood samples, and hundreds of well-trained health workers ready to treat patients and control the spread of the virus.

As we thank the EU in April, Rotary and its partners look forward to strengthening the partnership with the European Union and working together to achieve a polio-free world.

About the author

Sajjad Karim (ECR, UK) will co-host the Rotary Polio Eradication Champion award ceremony

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