

## What Is the Global Polio Initiative?

Since the GPEI was launched in 1988 during the World Health Assembly, the number of global polio cases has decreased by 99%, from over 350,000 in 1988 to fewer than 1,000 in 2003. In 2003, two major challenges to the Initiative emerged. First, wild polio transmission continued in six endemic countries and second, international spread from countries where poliovirus continued to circulate resulted in the re-infection of previously polio-free areas. International spread was exacerbated by the suspension of immunization in parts of northern Nigeria for up to 12 months in 2003 and 2004 due to rumors regarding oral polio vaccines (OPV) safety. Between 2003 and 2007, 27 countries were re-infected with imported poliovirus, 20 as a result of viruses originating from northern Nigeria.

Consequently, 2005-2006 was a period of unprecedented innovation to address these challenges. New tools such as monovalent vaccines (mOPV) were developed and refined laboratory procedures allowed the confirmation of poliovirus 50% faster than before. New tactics were developed to reach missed children in each of the four remaining polio-endemic countries, such as an accelerated mOPV supplementary immunization activity (SIA) schedule in India, the Immunization Plus Days strategy in Nigeria, synchronization of campaigns and initiatives to negotiate access in security compromised areas in Afghanistan and Pakistan, which are considered a single transmission zone. There was a renewed international determination to finish polio eradication as evidenced by new measures taken specifically to stop international spread. These measures included the World Health Assembly's adoption of resolution 59.1 which outlined new measures for reporting and addressing polio cases, the inclusion of polio in the International Health Regulations (IHR) and the requirements issued by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia for pilgrims attending Haj to be vaccinated against polio with OPV.

As one of the spearheading partners of the GPEI, UNICEF continues to focus on specific programmatic components in which the agency has a comparative advantage, namely as the lead agency for vaccine procurement and programme communication and social mobilization. UNICEF procured over 2 billion doses of OPV for SIAs in 30 countries in 2007. The supply of polio vaccines requires major international tendering of all WHO pre-qualified suppliers of OPV. UNICEF also supported the delivery of other services such as Vitamin A with polio supplementary activities. UNICEF continued to provide programmatic assistance to national governments in planning, monitoring, and evaluating all aspects of immunization activities to interrupt polio transmission in polio-affected countries and to maintain polio-free status elsewhere.

Communication activities in 2007 have sought to ensure that polio endemic and re-infected countries have strategies tailored to specific needs both for broad national campaigns and also to address challenges specific to underserved populations that are more at-risk for poliovirus infection. Global support activities include training, strategic guidance and media / advocacy.

Towards the end of 2007, the intensified efforts had demonstrated that the GPEI could overcome the final hurdles to wild poliovirus eradication and interrupt transmission in areas that had stubbornly resisted the efforts of the programme. By utilizing the new tools and tactics, the GPEI passed key landmarks in the fight against polio. Less than half-way through the intensified effort, the number of polio cases had been reduced by 63% and cases due to type 1 poliovirus,

the most dangerous of the two remaining serotypes, had fallen a remarkable 84%, with the absence of type 1 from western Uttar Pradesh. By the end of 2007, northern Nigeria had seen a 76% decline in cases and a 50% reduction in the number of children that had never been immunized. New tactics had also been developed to access children in the security compromised areas of Afghanistan and Pakistan. Of particular note, 25 of the 27 countries re-infected with imported poliovirus between 2003 and 2006 had interrupted transmission again.