

COUNTRY PROFILE: AFGHANISTAN

Global Polio Eradication Initiative (GPEI) Status: Endemic

Overview

- Afghanistan is one of only three remaining polio-endemic countries, along with Nigeria and Pakistan.
- Most areas of Afghanistan are free of polio.
- Wild poliovirus transmission persists in a number of districts in the Southern Region, where insecurity and conflict limit access to children for vaccination and a large number of individuals have never received a dose of oral polio vaccine (OPV).

Context

- Poliovirus transmission is highly localized, so eradication efforts focus on planning at the district- and sub-district level.
- Supplementary immunization activities are conducted frequently to achieve high vaccination coverage and boost population immunity.
- Engaged local political and administrative leaders are vital to the quality and success of eradication efforts.
- Warfare and political instability make it difficult to access hard-to-reach areas.
- Poor monitoring systems limit the ability to target communication and vaccination efforts that are needed to reach the most remote, underserved populations.

Challenges

- Polio campaign awareness levels in Afghanistan remain low, and caregivers often do not understand the importance of OPV – hence significant numbers of sick, sleeping or newborn children remain unvaccinated.
- Social norms limit vaccination rates, particularly in the Southern Region, where women rarely leave their homes unaccompanied, and male vaccination teams cannot enter households.
- Older children sometimes bring out younger siblings for vaccination and provide responses to campaign monitoring surveys, compromising data quality.
- A lack of trust inhibits vaccination efforts, especially in the context of war, and polio vaccination is commonly misperceived and avoided as a western strategy to sterilize the Muslim population.
- Cross-border migration by nomads between Afghanistan and Pakistan often miss vaccinations and face a high risk of infection.

Key Actions Needed

- Scale up and sharpen the focus of communication and vaccination campaigns.
- Build and maintain local staff capacity for district- and sub-district-level microplanning.
- Establish sufficient supportive infrastructure for implementing district-specific plans.
- Improving coordination of GPEI efforts with Pakistan to track, map and vaccinate migrating populations.
- Maintaining high levels of population immunity through repeated immunization activities to reduce the risk of outbreaks.

To learn more about the roles and responsibilities of UNICEF and other GPEI partners, visit:
<http://www.polioinfo.org/index.php/about-us/partners>