

UNICEF Executive Director Catherine Russell

UNICEF Executive Board First Regular Session of 2024

Special Focus Session on Polio Eradication

February 8, 2024

Excellencies, colleagues ... thank you for being here for this special focus session on polio eradication.

Polio eradication is finally within reach. Today, the wild poliovirus is confined to a few districts in Afghanistan and Pakistan. This marks the most significant progress against the disease since the inception of the Global Polio Eradication Initiative in 1988.

We have come this far thanks to the heroic efforts of community health workers reaching children with vaccines ... government leadership ... and the invaluable support of partners like the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and Rotary International – both of whom are here with us today.

After more than three decades of close collaboration, we have vaccinated over 3 billion children, and helped to wipe out wild polio across much of the world.

But this progress is fragile, and we cannot afford to lose focus during the final mile. Millions of children are still missing out on vaccinations because of conflict, climate disasters, displacement, and vaccine misinformation.

Most of these children live in the poorest and most marginalized communities with limited access to life saving vaccination and health services. These are also the places where the polio virus continues to thrive and spread.

And we are extremely concerned about variant forms of the poliovirus. Over the past two years, more than 1,300 children were paralyzed after being infected by a polio variant – 3,000 per cent more than paralysis cases linked to wild polio over the same period.

In response, UNICEF and our partners are working with national governments to urgently stop the spread of the poliovirus – focusing on fragile sub-national regions that have some of the highest numbers of unvaccinated children.

We are leveraging our expertise in vaccine supply and management to procure and distribute over one billion doses of polio vaccines to countries annually. AND we are partnering with local community leaders and health workers to build trust in vaccine efficacy.

More broadly, we are helping to strengthen health systems, by integrating polio activities with other services, including routine immunization.

Excellencies ... 2024 marks 50 years since the start of the Expanded Programme on Immunization, an initiative that has saved millions of lives from vaccine preventable diseases.

The programme played an essential role in the eradication of smallpox – the first human disease to be eradicated in our history. Now, we are at the cusp of eradicating the second.

But it will take all of us pulling together to beat polio once and for all. I urge you to advocate with your governments to prioritize polio eradication and childhood immunization.

The benefits of ending polio will be felt across entire health and social service systems. Resources spent previously on polio activities can be invested in other critical health and nutrition interventions for children. Polio eradication would also mark a milestone achievement aligned with the 2030 Immunization Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals.

Excellencies ... You can count on UNICEF to remain a steadfast partner in the Global Polio Eradication Initiative. I look forward to hearing more from you about how we can go that final mile and make polio a disease of the past.

Thank you.