

There is little doubt that the year 2020 will go down in history as one of transformation. No life was left untouched by the COVID-19 pandemic, which disrupted everything from international travel and trade to health systems. But it has not deterred the effort to eradicate polio.

The Eastern Mediterranean regional polio programme reflects on 2020 as a year of immense challenge and innovation. Over the last 12 months, teams have pivoted to provide vital support to countries responding to COVID-19 while maintaining poliovirus surveillance and have worked diligently to resume polio vaccination campaigns and respond to new outbreak emergencies.

Whilst the difficulties are far from over, 2020 has shown the resilience of the polio eradication workforce all over the Region, and the determination of parents and stakeholders to achieve a polio-free future.

Since campaigns resumed in July, almost 66 million children in the Eastern Mediterranean Region have received at least one dose of polio vaccine through supplementary immunization activities.

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In March, as borders began closing all over the world, the polio programme began an incredible pivot. In every country where the programme works, polio workers adapted their skills to trace contacts, deliver COVID-19 tests and share information on the virus. Meanwhile, polio campaigns were [temporarily paused](#) to reduce the risk of COVID-19 transmission. [Read about our work to fight COVID-19](#)

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In Pakistan, the *Sehat Tahaffuz 1166* polio eradication helpline at the National Emergency Operations Centre (NEOC) for Polio Eradication in Islamabad was [transformed to handle COVID-19 enquires](#) too. Call centre staff and medical personnel answered questions from members of the public and shared accurate information on preventing spread of the disease.

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In Afghanistan, women like Nasrin set forth to [continue their work](#) to educate communities about polio, even amid the pandemic. Disease surveillance also continued through 2020, with teams working to mitigate the effects of laboratory closures and national restrictions on movement.

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In July, [polio campaigns resumed](#) with strict COVID-19 safety measures in place. Both the Afghanistan and Pakistan polio programmes launched campaigns to urgently provide vaccines

to vulnerable children. The early months of the pandemic caused a perilous drop in immunity to many vaccine-preventable diseases, including polio, with an estimated [80 million missed vaccination opportunities](#)

[New polio outbreaks](#)

were confirmed in Yemen and Sudan in August, both caused by increasing low immunity to poliovirus.

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In Somalia, the first integrated campaign for polio and measles since the beginning of the pandemic [went ahead](#) in September. At a global level, an [emergency call to action](#) was launched in October to urgently raise money to avert major polio and measles outbreaks.

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In Lebanon, WHO supported the Ministry of Health to conduct a joint measles and [polio vaccination campaign](#) in an effort to restore pre-pandemic immunization rates. Pandemic-related disruptions to the vaccination programme led to an almost halving of child immunization rates – to 47%. On World Polio Day on 24 October, the Region came together to recognize the immense contributions of health workers, to reflect on the success of a wild polio-free Africa, and to acknowledge the work ahead to boost immunity levels and fight outbreaks in the Eastern Mediterranean Region.

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November and December saw vaccination campaigns in countries including Sudan, Djibouti and Iraq. The Eastern Mediterranean is now the only wild poliovirus endemic region in the world, and 2019 and 2020 have seen the virus spread in Afghanistan and Pakistan. It is crucial that progress is made in 2021 to protect the gains that have got us 99.9% of the way to a polio-free world. 8 / 8



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In countries around the Region, the polio programme stepped up for the pandemic emergency response, training thousands of personnel to adhere to COVID-19 precautions while delivering essential immunization and other health interventions. Despite the challenges that 2020 has held, the immense work achieved in the last 12 months has left us with even greater confidence that we can end polio. ☐ ☐ Thursday 2nd of May 2024 04:55:56 PM