1 April 2024 – As of January 2024, Iraq has achieved the polio transition process in full. It is the first country among the polio transition priority countries to achieve this remarkable feat.

Polio transition involves repurposing polio assets – knowledge, network and infrastructure – to strengthen the broader public health functions of a country within the overall context of strengthening the national health system. These wider functions include immunization, vaccine-preventable diseases surveillance, and emergency preparedness and response.

To safeguard polio essential functions through sustainable resources, it is crucial to achieve the full transition by shifting from external to domestic financing. In turn, successful polio transition and the integration and maintenance of polio assets to strengthen routine immunization, disease surveillance and outbreak response have social and economic benefits and offer a very high return on investment.

Dr Hanan Balkhy, WHO Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean, commended Iraq’s public health win and the positive impact it will yield: “I would like to congratulate Iraq for the achievement of polio transition in full in a considerably short period of time. This is a great step towards enhancing the health system’s resilience and regaining its capabilities to better serve the Iraqi population, making the best use of the polio programme assets.”

Iraq’s success in polio transition and integrating polio assets into the national health system will ensure sustainable funding of polio essential functions through domestic financing to maintain the country’s polio-free status.

Dr Rana Hajjeh, Director of Programme Management at the WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean, who also leads polio transition activities, highlighted the impact of Iraq’s full polio transition on achieving global polio targets: “This success also proves that polio transition can be done in the rest of the 6 priority countries in the Region, and hence contributes to sustain polio-free status in the country and in the world after the eradication of the poliovirus.”

Embarking on the polio transition process

Iraq began the polio transition process in 2019, with joint efforts by the Iraqi Ministry of Health and WHO. Since then, Iraq has been working to integrate polio essential functions into its health system. To ensure a smooth handover, 40 health workers at the central level and another 360 at subnational level were trained to support these functions and the broader health priorities.

“Today, Iraq marks a historic milestone as the first polio transition country globally to complete the full polio transition process. Since 2019, Iraq has successfully integrated key polio functions into its health system, a result of strong collaboration between the Ministry of Health and WHO Country Office in Iraq, supported by the WHO Regional Office and Global Polio Eradication Initiative. This achievement underscores Iraq’s dedication to sustainable health systems and highlights how repurposing polio assets can strengthen broader public health functions,” said Dr Georges Ki-Zerbo, WHO Representative and Head of Mission in Iraq.

WHO will continue to provide technical support to Iraq and monitor the quality of polio core functions, which are vital to maintain the country’s polio-free status.

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