



India sets to celebrate a landmark achievement for global public health and the worldwide effort to eradicate polio. India, which once had the highest number of polio cases in the world, has not reported any new cases in the past three years.

Poor sanitation, densely populated areas and large numbers of people living in extreme poverty set a perfect stage for the spread of polio. Long recognised as one of the most difficult places to eradicate polio, India now stands as an example for how to mount a successful disease response effort under the most complex circumstances.

India involved religious and community leaders to help build support for vaccination among local families. In cities like Ghaziabad, announcements by local imams in mosques actively encourage congregations to immunise their children, persuading parents to accept the polio vaccine where they otherwise may have resisted.

Back in 1988, the forty-first World Health Assembly marked the launch of the [Global Polio Eradication Initiative](#) (GPEI). It is spearheaded by national governments, WHO, Rotary International, the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), UNICEF, and supported by key partners including the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

The lessons learned from India's case are now part of the global strategic plan to secure a polio-free world by 2018. At the Global Vaccine Summit in April last year, the GPEI announced the new polio eradication and endgame strategic plan 2013-2018. Global donors pledged \$4bn (£2.4bn) to support the strategic plan – the first long-term strategy that comprehensively lays out what is needed to cease transmission of wild poliovirus and eradicate polio once and for all.

India's achievement is proof of what is possible when the global community comes together in support of polio eradication. Yet, polio outbreaks in previously polio-free countries – Somalia, Syria, Cameroon – and the presence of the polio virus in Egypt and Israel, are constant reminders of the need to act quickly; as long as polio remains anywhere, it is a threat everywhere.

In November 2013, aiming to stop a polio outbreak in Syria from spreading across the region, the United Nations World Health Organization (WHO) is spearheading the largest-ever immunization campaign in the Middle East, with plans to vaccinate some 20 million children in seven countries and territories against the highly infectious virus.

With only three polio-endemic countries left – Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Nigeria – we are the [closest the world has been](#) to achieving a polio-free world. With cases reduced by 99% since 1988, the international community has the required response strategies, political commitment and engagement. But ending polio comes down to governments, local leaders and agencies continuing to support the work of the thousands of community mobilisers and vaccinators at the frontline of this extraordinary effort.