

Educational Reading #1

PolioPlus – Rotary's Promise to the Children of the World

In the early 1980s, polio was one of the world's most feared diseases. Every year, more than 350,000 children in over 125 countries were paralyzed by the virus. Many died, while others lived with permanent disabilities.

Rotary believed something remarkable was possible—the complete eradication of polio from the planet.

In 1985, Rotary launched PolioPlus, becoming the first private organization to undertake a worldwide public health initiative of this scale. At that time, many experts believed eradicating polio was unrealistic. Rotary members disagreed.

Rotarians began raising funds, organizing vaccination campaigns, educating communities, transporting vaccines, and working alongside governments and health organizations. Rotary later became one of the founding partners of the Global Polio Eradication Initiative, joining the World Health Organization, UNICEF, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and later the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

The progress has been extraordinary.

Since Rotary began its efforts, polio cases have fallen by more than 99.9 percent. Hundreds of millions of children have received vaccines. Millions who might have suffered paralysis now live healthy lives.

The campaign has required perseverance. Political unrest, remote villages, misinformation, and logistical challenges have sometimes slowed progress. Yet Rotarians have continued their commitment because they understand an important public health principle: until polio is eliminated everywhere, it remains a threat everywhere.

The Gates Foundation has significantly amplified Rotary's work by matching Rotary's fundraising efforts, multiplying the impact of every dollar contributed. This partnership has accelerated vaccination campaigns and strengthened surveillance systems around the world.

Polio eradication offers benefits far beyond preventing one disease. The infrastructure developed for vaccination campaigns has also helped fight measles, COVID-19, Ebola, and other infectious diseases by improving public health systems in many countries.

Rotary members continue to advocate for funding, organize awareness events such as World Polio Day each October, and educate their communities about the importance of vaccinations.

When polio is finally eradicated, it will become only the second human disease ever eliminated, after smallpox. It will stand as one of history's greatest public health achievements—and Rotary will have played a central role.