

## From **Minor Player** to **Champion**



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### Polio Eradication and Routine Immunisation

“Let me close by making an appeal on polio. You have made tremendous progress in the past year. Polio cases are down by 95 per cent. But if we let our guard down for a minute, polio can spring back. We cannot let this happen. Let us eradicate this crippling disease once and for all.”

*UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon at a breakfast meeting with the NGF in 2011*



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Ban Ki-moon was deeply impressed by how Nigeria had taken great strides towards the complete eradication of polio and was keen to ensure that progress continued.

These achievements have indeed been hugely significant. Nigeria has had a chequered history in polio eradication. In 1997, the National Programme on Immunisation (NPI) began operating as the stand-alone initiative to bring vaccines to Nigeria. Prior to this, the ministries of health at the federal and state levels and the departments of health at the local government area (LGA) level had been responsible for providing a reliable and sustainable routine immunisation programme for the country. Commendable progress had been made through these channels: more than 80 per cent vaccination coverage of children was achieved on a regular basis.

The creation of the NPI, contrary to expectations, did not achieve the desired objective. It experienced poor leadership and staff shortages and its programme delivery was unsatisfactory. Little improvement was seen in the eradication of polio. The annual number of reported cases averaged 504 between 1994 and 2007, with peaks in 1999 (981 cases), 2005 (831 cases) and 2006 (1,143 cases).

The NGF was visited in February 2009 by Bill Gates, Head of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. The Foundation was involved in the global campaign against polio; and



in this visit, he secured the commitment of the 36 governors to collectively wage war against polio and advance immunisation. This pledge has since become known as the Abuja Commitment. In it they pledge to eradicate polio by:

- 1. Providing active leadership of polio eradication activities, including routine immunisation, and primary health care in the states and directing LGA chairmen to ensure that all children under five are reached and vaccinated during any polio eradication activity in states;*
- 2. Improving operational quality at the LGA level in states by chairing quarterly meetings with all LGA chairmen to closely review the planning, implementation and results of polio eradication activities, improving routine immunisation/primary health care and identifying remedies for poor-performing LGAs;*
- 3. Allocating additional financial and human resources to strengthen primary health care so that it can sustain routine immunisation services and improve the implementation of campaigns (Immunisation Plus Days) in states;*
- 4. Reporting back to the president through the National Economic Council (NEC) on a quarterly basis on the status of polio eradication efforts, including routine immunisation, in states; and*
- 5. Improving primary health care as a more holistic plan to address the issue of immunisation through community health insurance schemes.*



In a visit in June 2010, Mr Gates held a special session with the Forum to chart a roadmap for future work towards the eradication of polio.

One of the most exciting initiatives was the 2011 Immunisation Leadership Challenge, designed to reward states that made significant improvements in the eradication of polio and in routine immunisation by the end of 2012. This joint initiative of the Gates Foundation and the NGF was created during a visit to Nigeria in September–October 2011 by Mr Gates.

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The Forum drew up a calendar in which all the states agreed to participate in the quarterly polio eradication advocacy campaign, to be personally supervised by the governors. In a visit in June 2010, Mr Gates held a special session with the Forum to chart a roadmap for future work towards the eradication of polio.

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He recognised that “Nigeria’s leaders are critical to making Nigeria polio free and their renewed confirmation... of the Abuja Commitments will make an important difference. Polio cases in Nigeria dropped 95 percent from 2009 to 2010, proving that Nigeria has the tools and ability to end the spread of this virus. Nigeria should be proud of its tremendous success in the fight against polio, but we are at a crossroads and the

stakes are high.” In 2011, attention to polio had waned and polio had re-emerged as a serious threat to children’s health. “I am encouraged that President Jonathan and leaders throughout the country have reaffirmed their commitment to make Nigeria polio free and to contribute to making the world free of this crippling disease once and for all,” he said. “Their renewed leadership can stop the resurgence in polio cases we have seen this year.”

Mr Gates’ message was reinforced by His Excellency Chibuike Rotimi Amaechi, Governor of Rivers State and Chairman of the Nigeria Governors’ Forum as of 2011. “Nigeria’s governors want to stop polio and improve routine immunisation to protect Nigeria’s children against preventable diseases. This award recognises that effort, and the fact that we need to work hard if we want to stop polio in this country by 2012.”

The Challenge pledged to award US\$500,000 to states that reached a pre-defined threshold of improvement. Its overall objective was to fast-track achievement of the global milestone of interrupting the further transmission of the wild polio virus in Nigeria. The award was to be used to support governors’ top health priorities, including malaria, tuberculosis, HIV prevention and treatment, and safe drinking water and hygiene programmes. The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation also promised to match contributions by states to their chosen health project of up to US\$250,000. Only six state governors qualified at that time, but it was the citizens of Nigeria who really gained by the commitment to the initiative. The number of polio cases dropped by about 50 per cent before the end of 2012, rose *lightly* in 2013 and dropped again drastically in 2014.

The key to this success has been the relationship between the NGF and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, which has supported the Forum in so many ways. “As Nigeria’s partner, the Gates Foundation is committed to doing what we can to support their efforts to end this terrible, but preventable, disease.” The Foundation provided technical support to the Secretariat, and the Secretariat in turn provided the required support to the states. The Foundation employs Dr Zikrullah Giwa, a specialist on polio and immunisation, to coordinate the Immunisation Leadership Challenge.