Natalia Figueroa - Chile

Hi, my name is Natalia Figueroa, and I am the president of the Utah International Mountain Forum. Today, I will be discussing my heritage country of Chile, where my family has Indigenous Mapuche roots in the rural regions of southern Chile.

To begin with Chile's history, polio cases were documented as early as 1913, 1921 and 1922. By the middle of the 20th century, polio had become a recurring public-health crisis. Chile reported 2,312 cases total from 1949- 1961.

In response to the 1961 epidemic, Chile organized mass oral vaccination with collaboration from Albert Sabin. The program targeted children from three months to seven years of age and aimed to reach at least 80 percent of that group.

However, challenges remained. Between 1969 and 1970, Chile reported 205 polio cases, with over 70 percent of studied cases involving unvaccinated or partially vaccinated individuals. To reach rural children, Chile used vaccination trains, as reported in 1973. Through continued vaccination and surveillance, Chile recorded its final two cases in 1975, becoming the fourth Latin American country to eliminate polio.

Alongside vaccination, Chile focused on supporting polio survivors. In 1947, Dr. Carlos Urrutia, medical colleagues, and Rotary Club of Providencia established the Society for the Assistance of Disabled Children in response to overcrowded hospitals and the growing need to help children living with polio's lasting effects. This marked Rotary's early involvement in polio recovery in Chile, decades before the launch of PolioPlus in 1985.

Although polio has been eliminated from Chile, imported cases remain a risk, especially in unvaccinated communities. In 2021, the Chilean Navy transported COVID-19 vaccines nearly 600 miles by sea to isolated southern communities, illustrating the challenges of reaching remote areas, including rural Mapuche communities, where complete polio vaccination coverage has not been confirmed. This reminds us that eliminating polio is not the end of the effort; continued vaccination, outreach, and surveillance are essential to keeping communities protected. Thank you!