

CASE STUDY

Engaging the highest levels of government to bring the promise of immunization to all Congolese



In recent years, the world has seen an increase in infectious disease outbreaks brought on by environmental factors, urbanization, connectivity, travel, and trade. The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) has been hit especially hard, facing recent outbreaks of Ebola, polio, measles, and cholera. Challenges in the health sector—including poor quality of services, limited ability to rapidly respond to health emergencies, low use of available care and services, and limited public accountability for these health services—have contributed to the severity of these epidemics in the DRC. Furthermore, they have been exacerbated by ongoing conflicts, political crises, and insufficient government funding.

Unfortunately, the national immunization program has been vulnerable to these challenges, and vaccination coverage continues to decline. Every year, approximately 1.8 million children in the DRC miss out on a full course of vaccines. As a result, the country has one of the highest rates of child mortality in the world.

With the aim of galvanizing efforts to improve vaccination and stop preventable deaths, PATH partnered with the Gates Foundation, other partners, and the newly elected government to convene a major event focused on driving action on this issue. At the invitation of the president, governors and leaders from each of the DRC's 26 provinces convened in Kinshasa in July 2019 for the National Forum on Immunization and Polio Eradication to discuss joint efforts to strengthen the country's immunization system and advance progress toward polio eradication. The Forum culminated in an unprecedented commitment: the signing of the Kinshasa Declaration on Immunization and Polio Eradication.

The challenge and opportunity

The DRC government has identified vaccination as one of the Ministry of Health's top-priority approaches to achieve the National Health Development Plan goals for reducing child morbidity and mortality.

In 2017, the DRC government joined African Heads of State in endorsing the Addis Declaration on Immunization, vowing to achieve 90% national immunization coverage by 2020. To translate this commitment to action, the government developed the DRC ADI Roadmap in 2018, focusing on approaches that will be critical to strengthening the immunization system.

The same year, the government launched the Emergency Plan for the Revitalization of Routine Immunization—also known as the *Mashako Plan*—aimed at raising immunization coverage nationally by 15% over 18 months by targeting the eight most vulnerable provinces.



Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation/Diana Zeynab Alhindawi

"Together, let us all take our share of responsibility for protecting all our children from vaccine-preventable diseases," said His Excellency Felix Tshisekedi Tshilombo, President of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, speaking at the National Forum on Immunization and Polio Eradication.

However, within DRC's decentralized health context, getting buy-in at the national level alone is not enough. Both national and provincial leaders have a role to play in fostering a strong immunization system across the country, addressing gaps in routine immunization coverage, and overcoming barriers to access and utilization of immunization services. Progress has been made in recent years, but key gaps persist.

It was in this context that, in late 2018, Felix Tshisekedi Tshilombo became President of the Republic of DRC. General elections were held to establish new leadership in the 500 seats of the National Assembly and the 715 elected seats of the 26 provincial assemblies. PATH capitalized on the chance to educate these newly-appointed members of the Congolese government on immunization throughout the country.

Implementing the strategy

Using the current political climate as a springboard, PATH sought opportunities to ensure the prioritization of immunization among newly elected provincial authorities. One idea was to position the First Lady as a champion and host an event to rally political will for immunization efforts.

Upon hearing about the event, President Tshisekedi decided he wanted to preside over it himself. As a result, the scale and protocol required to convene the event grew quite significantly, evolving it into a 300-person forum that brought together national leaders, governors and officials from each of the DRC's 26 provinces, and key immunization stakeholders from around the world to participate in one unified discussion. The National Forum on Immunization and Polio Eradication, held on July 22-23, 2019, provided a global platform for the newly appointed president to share his vision for strengthening immunization systems and polio eradication in the DRC. It also sought to broaden technical and political thinking and strengthen the implementation of priority strategies for the relaunch of the *Elargi de Vaccination* (national vaccine program), including political commitment and accountability.

PATH and partners, including the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Gavi, Elargi de Vaccination (PEV), UNICEF, the World Health Organization, and the World Bank began work four months in advance of the Forum. With guidance from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the partners formed sub-teams focused on technical content, logistics, communications, and budget. PATH spearheaded the Forum agenda and coordinated logistics for all 26 governors and presidents of the provincial assemblies to travel to Kinshasa for the two-day meeting, ensuring engagement from all levels of the DRC government that play a role in meeting targets for child immunization.

Achieving the goal

During the convening, President Tshisekedi publicly affirmed his commitment to immunization as a pillar of universal health coverage and pledged to remove the DRC off the list of countries with the highest infant mortality rate. Urging leaders in attendance to join him in committing to increase immunization rates throughout the country, he decried the fact that one out of every seven children in the DRC still dies of vaccine-preventable diseases before the age of five, and called on participants to propose new and innovative approaches for strengthening immunization systems at both the national and provincial level.

The Forum culminated in a tremendous display of commitment from the country's new provincial government when the governors, presidents of provincial assemblies, ministers of health, and heads of the provincial health divisions signed on to the Kinshasa Declaration on Immunization and Polio Eradication. Signatories committed to take specific actions to provide oversight, accountability, and resources to improve immunization systems in each of their



Photo: Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance

Key partners:

- The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation
- Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance
- Elargi de Vaccination (national vaccine program)
- UNICEF
- WHO AFRO
- The World Bank

A lesson learned:

Requests from the President and Ministry of Health for advocacy and communications support required bandwidth and skill sets beyond that of PATH's small advocacy team in the DRC. PATH has received supplemental funding from the Gates Foundation to elevate and optimize our performance in the DRC by imbedding interim special advisors in our program to support and strengthen the capacity of local staff.

respective provinces. The Kinshasa Declaration provides a common framework for vaccination that unites decision-makers at all levels of government and provides a systematic monitoring mechanism for accountability.

The day after President Tshisekedi spoke at the Forum, the DRC Ministry of Finance announced a disbursement of USD\$3 million in co-financing for the purchase of new vaccines through Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance. At the heart of Gavi's funding model, co-financing requires countries to meet part of the cost of vaccines themselves, while Gavi supports the rest. This enhances country ownership of immunization financing and helps build and strengthen financially sustainable immunization programs in preparation for Gavi to phase out support for these vaccines.

Factors for success

1. **Engaging policymakers at all levels of the government.** Because of the DRC's decentralized government, policymakers at both the national and provincial levels have a role to play in ensuring the success of immunization programs. Convening these policymakers in one place and time enhanced mutual accountability for a shared goal.
2. **Identifying a strong network of national and international partners.** A shared understanding of immunization challenges in the DRC was important to form a strong network of partners with the same goal: seeing an improvement in immunization at all levels in the country.
3. **Securing buy-in from President Tshisekedi himself.** The personal involvement of the Head of State in the Forum convinced local and national officials of the need to prioritize immunization. His participation sent a strong message about existing political will at the highest level; he took the time to invite each participant to the Forum to show his commitment and attention.
4. **Building on the existing immunization improvement strategy (the *Mashako Plan*).** The country had already set up a common vision with clear actions to improve vaccination on the ground. The Forum was able to build on this plan and bring together key decision-makers to make a strong renewed commitment at all levels.
5. **Providing an opportunity for learning and sharing experiences on immunization among provinces.** During the Forum, the governors and their delegations shared their experiences from different provinces in order to learn from each other. This was one of the greatest outcomes of the Forum—never before has such an opportunity arisen to have a conversation specifically on vaccination at the highest level in the decentralized context.

Looking forward

At the conclusion of the Forum, President Tshisekedi called for a six-month status report and one-year re-convening of Forum participants to discuss progress and challenges toward achieving commitments laid out in the Kinshasa Declaration. PATH has continued to work closely with the government and in key provinces to translate these commitments to policies, funding, and transparent reporting of results.

The clear goals and strong leadership that emerged out of the Forum and resulting declaration are a strong sign of Congolese leaders' appetite for strengthening immunization systems and ridding the country of polio once and for all.

PATH's 10-Part Approach to Advocacy Impact

Successful policy advocacy is guided by systematic analysis and pragmatic processes. PATH's ten-part framework, outlined below, is a methodical approach to policy change that has helped over 600 individuals in more than 100 organizations in countries around the world achieve health policy change.

- Identify the advocacy issue
- State the policy goal
- Identify decision-makers and influencers
- Identify the interests of the decision-makers and influencers
- Clarify opposition and potential obstacles facing your issue
- Define your advocacy assets and gaps
- Identify key partners
- State the tactics you need to reach your goal
- Define your most powerful messages
- Determine how you will measure success

For more information and resources, and to find out how we can help, visit <http://sites.path.org/advocacyandpolicy>.