

## ACCELERATING ACCESS AND BUILDING CAPACITY

# ROTAVIRUS INTRODUCTION AS AN OPPORTUNITY FOR SHORING UP THE ROUTINE IMMUNIZATION SYSTEM IN THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO

The Rotavirus Accelerated Vaccine Introduction Network (RAVIN) project supported the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) in preparing for the introduction of rotavirus vaccine, which is currently slated for late 2019. The rotavirus vaccine introduction planning process was an opportunity to strengthen the country's routine immunization program, build capacity, and mitigate delays.

### Building Technical Knowledge and Professional Networks

RAVIN's in-country representatives briefed local decision makers using up-to-date technical materials in translation on rotavirus disease burden, available vaccines, and vaccine impact in the region. RAVIN also co-sponsored an exchange workshop bringing together government officials and partners from the DRC and

Benin in Kinshasa to share best practices from previous new vaccine introductions, discuss ongoing efforts to introduce rotavirus vaccines in these countries, and strategize about the best way forward.

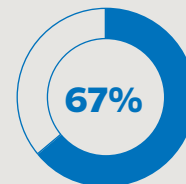
After the DRC submitted a successful Gavi application in 2016, a short time period after RAVIN began to support local decision makers, there were several major changes in the available rotavirus vaccine product choices that could have significantly delayed the introduction. To respond, RAVIN packaged details on new vaccine products and cold chain implications, providing evidence to local decision makers about potential benefits and challenges of each product and enabling the National Immunization Technical Advisory Group to feel confident in its choice. Following a switch in rotavirus vaccine product preference, RAVIN helped rapidly adapt the country's training materials such as training videos for health workers on rotavirus vaccine products.

### PREVENTING ROTAVIRUS IN THE DRC

The DRC has one of the world's highest rotavirus mortality rates at 103 per 100,000 people (2017)<sup>1</sup>



There are approximately **3.2 million children** without access to rotavirus vaccines (RVV) in the DRC (4% of all children without access to RVV in the world)<sup>3</sup>



*of diarrheal hospitalizations in children >5 are due to rotavirus (2016)<sup>2</sup>*

**Rotavirus causes 13,613 deaths annually in children >5 in the DRC, 7% of all the global toll<sup>1</sup>**

## Strengthening In-country Immunization Networks

Immunization partners should coordinate, speak with one voice, and align priorities to best support immunization programs. With deep knowledge of the Immunization Coordination Committee sub-committee on immunization—and neutral, well-respected, and fast-moving information brokers at the country level—RAVIN was able to re-engage this important platform both at the central and provincial level. While this involved extensive travel to priority and high-risk provinces, it was an essential step toward ensuring the successful rollout of rotavirus vaccine as well as future introductions such as HPV.

While re-energizing the ICC sub-committee on immunizations, RAVIN also linked together a number of other partners supporting the country's immunization program to enable greater efficiencies with rotavirus vaccine rollout and other new vaccine introductions.

## Overcoming Bottlenecks in Expanding Cold Chain

The need to expand cold chain capacity to accommodate rotavirus vaccine has delayed introductions in some settings.<sup>4</sup> The DRC identified insufficient cold chain capacity at the central as well as the provincial level. With the support of a cold chain expert, RAVIN supported the national RVV logistics committee in analyzing and making recommendations to update and expand the DRC's current cold chain to ensure the infrastructure is prepared for the new vaccine.

Further, RAVIN's in-country technical assistant collaborated with key stakeholders to identify bottlenecks in all 26 provinces in order to expand the cold chain in preparation for RVV introduction. Hundreds of health zones central offices and tens of EPI satellite sites required additional cold chain strengthening. Since additional introductions and changes in vaccine products and packaging may require diverse new cold storage solutions, this experience could pave the way for quicker adaptations over time for the DRC.

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### ABOUT RAVIN

RAVIN is a partnership between the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health International Vaccine Access Center (IVAC), John Snow Research and Training Institute (JSI), and the U.S. CDC providing strategic technical assistance in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Cambodia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Lao PDR, Myanmar, and Nepal. Its support, which complements services and leadership provided by WHO, UNICEF, and Expanded Program on Immunization (EPI) teams, encompasses rotavirus vaccine introduction decision-making, Gavi applications, introduction preparation, implementation, and impact assessments. For more information, visit [ivac.jhu.edu](http://ivac.jhu.edu).

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### REFERENCES

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2. World Health Organization. WHO Global Invasive Bacterial Vaccine Preventable Disease and Rotavirus Surveillance Network Bulletin. 2017; Available from: <https://mailchi.mp/046b8f12e001/who-ib-vpd-and-rotavirus-surveillance-bulletin-june-1566245?e=225412eff9>.
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