

REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO

Report prepared by the Joint UN Team on AIDS

JOINT TEAM

UNHCR, UNICEF, WFP, UNDP, UNFPA, WHO, UNAIDS SECRETARIAT

JOINT PROGRAMME CONTRIBUTIONS AND RESULTS IN 2020-2021

The Joint Team in the Republic of the Congo continued to support the Government and local partners to curb new HIV infections among vulnerable and key populations. Community-led outreach initiatives were supported to reach gay men and other men who have sex with men and female sex workers with HIV prevention information and services, including HIV testing. Integration of HIV and tuberculosis services was supported through innovative information technologies. Young people were trained on outreach and communication strategies to increase demand for available HIV and COVID-19 services and access to accurate HIV information among adolescent and young people. The Joint Team further provided financial support to adolescent and young people to develop a mobile application and create HIV and gender-based violence messages for dissemination via traditional and social media outlets. Participants from government and non-government institutions, youth leaders representing regional networks and associations of young people with disabilities were also capacitated on the prevention of HIV and gender-based violence. The Joint Team made significant contribution to increasing prevention of mother-to child transmission of HIV (PMTCT) coverage and strengthening the country's capacity to perform early infant diagnosis and viral load monitoring services, including through the implementation of task delegation. This led to a 49% increase in HIV testing coverage among pregnant women and significant increase in the access to early infant diagnosis for HIV-exposed children. Technical support was provided to raise donor funding for the national HIV and COVID-19 responses and ensure the continuity of HIV services during the pandemic.

HIV PREVENTION AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE AND KEY POPULATIONS

Several community-led outreach initiatives supported by the Joint Team sensitized 570 female sex workers and their clients, and gay men and other men who have sex with men with information on prevention of HIV and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs) in Brazzaville and Pointe-Noire cities. A total of 402 people received HIV testing and counselling as part of these initiatives. The Joint Team conducted capacity building training for 26 sex workers and gay men and other men who have sex with men who in turn provided support to the implementation of these outreach services and fill the existing gap in access to HIV information and services among key populations.

The Joint Team supported networks of young people to promote access to integrated HIV and tuberculosis services through innovative information technologies. A training session was organized for 21 young people on available services and various outreach and communication strategies for them to promote these services among their peers. Process is underway to procure mobile phones with internet connection for 1000 adolescent and young people to improve access to integrated services and accurate information.

The Joint Team supported the development and launch of the Hello Ado application aimed at providing information on HIV and sexual and reproductive health, and available services. Around 603 public, private, and community service providers in Brazzaville city and Pointe Noire were identified and their contact information were added to the application. A commercial spot promoting the Hello Ado was also developed for broadcasting on national and local television channels.

To mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Joint Team, in collaboration with the Ministry of Youth and Civic Education, built the capacity of 62 leaders from around 40 associations of young people in Brazzaville, Dolisie, and Pointe-Noire cities; and supported trained leaders to organize awareness raising sessions on COVID-19 reaching 4600 adolescents and young people. The youth associations were also provided with personal protection equipment and COVID-19 prevention guides developed by the Joint Team.

The Joint Team provided training and computers for call centre operators and data managers at the Public Health Emergency Operations Centre (COUSP) to strengthen and expand access to COVID-19 information and linkage to HIV and COVID-19 services during the pandemic. In total, 48 people were trained and supervised in 2020 which improved the quality of services among vulnerable populations, including people living with HIV, pregnant women, and people with disabilities.

PMTCT AND EARLY INFANT DIAGNOSIS

In 2021, the Joint Team supported efforts to scale up PMTCT and paediatric HIV services with a focus on early infant diagnosis through point of care (PoC) and community-led PMTC services and task delegation. This included building capacity of 96 doctors, nurses, and midwives on task delegation, pre- and post-HIV test counselling, requesting polymerase chain reaction (PCR) tests and delivering care for pregnant women and children. Additionally, the Joint Team procured GeneXpert machines and testing reagents, and trained technicians from five laboratories to strengthen their capacity to perform early HIV case detection and viral load testing services. As a result, the number of health centres offering a full PMTCT service package in the Republic of the Congo increased from 33 in 2020 to 110 in 2021.

In collaboration with the Ministry of Health, the Joint Team conducted a supervision mission to care centres to monitor and document the situation of pregnant women with COVID-19, through interviews with patients and their care givers. Findings from this supervision will inform future programming among pregnant women.

HUMAN RIGHTS AND GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

Technical support was provided to train 30 social supervisors from the Ministry of Social Affairs, Humanitarian Action, and Social Solidarity, nongovernmental organizations, and associations on the prevention of HIV and gender-based violence (GBV), and human rights. In Pointe-Noire city, the trained supervisors sensitized 50 adolescents and young people living with disabilities or HIV on these issues. The Joint Team will continue supporting the supervisors to reach and address the needs of adolescents and young people living with disabilities or HIV, children in conflict with the law, and orphans who are at higher risk of HIV infection, GBV, and human rights violations.

Similarly, three training sessions on HIV prevention, GBV and human rights were conducted for 65 youth leaders representing two regional networks of adolescents and young people—African Youth and Adolescents Network (AfriYAN) and the Pan African UN Youth Leadership Network for the MDGs (ROJALNU)—and other associations working with young people living with disabilities in Brazzaville, Pointe-Noire and Ouessou. As a result, a total of 7000 young people and adolescents were reached and sensitized on HIV and GBV through various social networks. Besides, young people received technical and financial support to create public service announcements on HIV, GBV, and COVID-19 and broadcast on social networks and on national and local television channels.

INVESTMENT AND EFFICIENCY

Technical and financial support provided by the Joint Team for the preparation of the Global Fund concept note prioritized key populations and mobilized Euro 23 million for the HIV response for the 2021-2023 period. An additional Euro eight million was raised from the Global Fund COVID-19 Response Mechanism to support the national COVID-19 response.

As part of the Pandemic Emergency Financing Facility (PEF) initiative, the Joint Team financially supported the continuity of sexual and reproductive health during the COVID-19 pandemic. The PEF funds were used to procure and distribute personal protective equipment and other essential inputs for healthcare workers to stay safe and continue providing these services, especially for pregnant women, women of childbearing age, young girls, and displaced persons and refugees in humanitarian sites. Through the PEF, the Joint Team supported indigenous populations (pygmies) in the Lékoumou region to establish a soap production unit to generate income and reduce their vulnerability to the impact of the pandemic.

CONTRIBUTION TO THE INTEGRATED SDG AGENDA

Guided by the *leaving no one behind* principle, the Joint Team is working towards realization of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the 2030 Agenda in the Republic of the Congo. Through capacity building and technical and financial support, the Joint Team contributed to the implementation of the United Nations Development Assistance Framework (UNDAF) 2020-2024, particularly towards result 3.1: *“By the end of 2021, the technical and operational capacities of the deconcentrated structures (departmental directorates, health districts, etc.) in terms of promoting behaviour favourable to health, HIV and AIDS, nutrition, water, hygiene and sanitation are reinforced and operational”*.

CHALLENGES AND LESSONS LEARNED

Low uptake of HIV and sexual and reproductive health services among adolescents and young people continues to increase their risk of acquiring HIV, STIs, and early pregnancy.

Inadequate implementation of differentiated models of HIV services for pregnant women and children linked to insufficient training of healthcare workers and recurrent stockout of essential commodities remained the principal bottleneck in the HIV response in 2020-2021. While improved availability of commodities in 2021 and the implementation of the task delegation strategy helped to increase PMTCT coverage, it is critical for the Joint Team to intensify its efforts to ensure the availability of essential commodities and medicines, and the scale up of the task delegation initiative to address the human resources scarcity in the country.

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