

GABON

Report prepared by the Joint UN Team on AIDS

JOINT TEAM

UNICEF, UNDP, UNFPA, UNESCO, WHO, UNAIDS SECRETARIAT, FAO, IOM

JOINT PROGRAMME CONTRIBUTIONS AND RESULTS IN 2020-2021

Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, the Joint Team provided substantial support to ensure the continuity of HIV services. Peer educators, community leaders and health workers were trained on the prevention of sexually transmitted infections, including HIV; and were supported to undertake outreach activities within their respective communities. The All In campaign was rolled out reaching thousands of adolescents and young people with HIV prevention and testing information and services. Academic staff were trained, and educational tools were developed to implement comprehensive sexuality education in pilot schools benefiting more than 18 000 learners. Various community outreach and sensitization initiatives were also implemented to educate and provide access to HIV testing and counselling services among young people and key populations. The Joint Team facilitated training of healthcare workers and formative supervision missions to support decentralization of antiretroviral treatment services which helped increase the number of treatment sites in the country. People living with HIV were also supported to access viral load testing services to close the persistent gap in viral load monitoring coverage. Personal protective equipment, skill building, and seed packages were also provided to vulnerable people living with HIV to help them establish income generating activities—vital to ensuring their adherence to treatment and overall well-being. Finally, heightened advocacy and technical support led to the decriminalization of same-sex sexual relationships in Gabon, and the revision of the law on the elimination of violence against women and the prohibition of their exclusion from the national economy.

HIV PREVENTION AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE AND KEY POPULATIONS

Technical and financial support was provided for the implementation of the *All In* campaign aimed at improving HIV prevention services among adolescents and young people. A total of 7941 adolescents and young people were reached by the campaign, of which 831 accessed HIV testing and counselling services. An estimated 29 634 condoms and 1848 leaflets were also distributed during the campaign.

In the context of a needs assessment rolled out among people living with HIV, key populations and young people during the COVID-19 pandemic, and in collaboration with the General Directorate for AIDS Prevention (DGPS) and civil society organizations, the Joint Team supported an awareness raising campaign reaching 710 young people and their parents in six regions with information on the prevention of HIV, sexually transmitted infections (STIs), early and/or unwanted pregnancies, GBV, discrimination, drug use, and COVID-19.

In 2020-2021, the Joint Team made significant contributions to the sensitising and building the capacity of adolescents and young people on various SRH issues. These included the training of more than 250 adolescents and youth peer educators from 13 secondary schools on SRH and GBV prevention; the sensitisation on breast and cervical cancer of 175 adolescent girls and young women living with disabilities or in vulnerable situations, including the hearing impaired girls from the Arc-en-ciel orphanage and youth associations from the Libreville penitentiary; engaging 6000 adolescents and young people on risks of disasters, including their impact on SRH ; training 40 outreach workers on SRH in the cities of Franceville and Moanda; sensitising 7265 young people from associations on SRH, early pregnancies, GBV and COVID-19 in Haut Ogooué province; and sensitising 40 migrant community leaders and 1770 migrants on adolescent and young people on SRH, HIV, GBV and COVID-19.

The Joint Team supported the integration of SRH and comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) into pre-primary and primary education by training 71 academic supervisors and 38 staff from the Ministry of Education in the delivery of CSE and development of educational tools on the prevention and management of early pregnancy. A total of 18 478 students benefited from CSE sessions in the pilot schools, while seven schools met to validate CSE tools for adolescent girls. Following a national consultation with various stakeholders, including the Ministry of Education, civil society and religious and traditional communities, a draft declaration of commitment on CSE has been prepared in 2021 for the Government.

Under the Citizenship and Social Protection initiative led by the Government, the Joint Team supported the training of 63 community leaders and peer educators from indigenous populations, as well as the development and distribution of awareness-raising materials, condoms, and HIV testing kits to improve access to HIV prevention services among this group. Technical and financial assistance was provided to 90 community leaders from 15 associations to scale up community education on sexual and reproductive health (SRH), gender-based violence (GBV) and COVID-19 among indigenous populations, while a group of young indigenous artists was trained in community outreach techniques on these topics.

The Joint Team provided technical support to Santé Plus Pro Humanitus - a civil society organisation working with key populations - to train over 100 leaders and peer educators from key populations on HIV testing, treatment, and care. The trainees then sensitised more than 2500 people from key population groups on these same topics in Lambaréné, Libreville, Makokou, Mouila, Port-Gentil and Tchibanga. They also reached more than 300 people from these groups with HIV counselling and testing services, of whom 50 people tested positive for HIV and were linked to antiretroviral treatment services. In addition, technical and financial assistance was provided for the development of a smartphone application to collect information from key populations, including people from the LGBTI community, to document their needs and concerns. A total of 321 people used the application and responded to the needs survey, informing programme planning for key populations.

To ensure continuity of outreach services, the Joint Team, in collaboration with the African Centres for Disease Control, provided information, education and communication materials and personal protective equipment (PPE) to 71 community outreach workers to raise awareness among an estimated 15 600 community members about a range of issues, including HIV, SRH, GBV and COVID-19.

HIV TESTING AND TREATMENT

As part of the national efforts to provide indigenous peoples with healthcare and HIV services, the Joint Team procured 1000 rapid HIV test kits to increase access to HIV testing among this population. Additionally, 30 healthcare providers from 15 schools were trained in the promotion and provision of HIV counselling and testing services among adolescents and young people in secondary schools, and another 30 people from six provinces were trained in family testing.

The Government was supported to scale up the decentralisation of antiretroviral treatment and care services for people living with HIV by training over 200 healthcare providers on the national treatment and care guidelines. Formative supervisions were conducted for more than 500 health care providers, including doctors, nurses, psychologists, social workers, pharmacy managers and data managers to assess and strengthen good practices. National guidelines, patient management tools, screening algorithms and treatment protocols for children, adolescents and pregnant women were developed and disseminated across the country. Similarly, technical support was provided for the annual review of the therapeutic management of people living with HIV. These efforts contributed to the increase in the number of centres providing care for people living with HIV, from 27 in 2020 to 36 in 2021. Four civil society organizations and health centres were also supported to continue providing quality HIV services for people living with HIV and key populations.

To close the gap in viral load testing coverage, the Joint Team supported 1800 vulnerable people living with HIV to access viral load testing and genotyping, covering 12% of the national viral load surveillance needs for 2020. Technical assistance was also provided for an audit of active records of people living with HIV to identify the number of people living with HIV enrolled in antiretroviral treatment services in health care sites across the country.

Four adolescents and young people from *Réalisez vos Rêves*—an association of adolescents and young people, some of whom are living with HIV—were trained to improve their skills in peer education and support for treatment adherence and retention in care. In addition, 578 adolescents and young people living with HIV received PPE, to ensure their safety and improve their overall health. Another 40 people benefited from capacity building in farming methods, technical supervision, short-cycle seed packets and PPE. Similarly, more than 10 young women living with HIV in rural areas have been trained in beekeeping techniques to help them generate income for themselves and their families.

The Joint Team supported a rapid survey on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on HIV programmes and people living with HIV in Gabon for the period 2020-2021. A total of 710 (509 females) people living with HIV participated in the survey, of whom 6% were migrants that came to Gabon for work reasons and 2% were refugees. During the survey, 93% of the respondents confirmed being on treatment and 5% had stopped their treatment, of whom 24% said they stopped because of stockouts, 18% due to lack of money. Around 13% of the people on antiretroviral treatment stated they could not go to the ART centres because of a lack of test results requested by their treating doctors. Findings of this survey was and will be further used for programme monitoring and the implementation of mitigating measures to increase access to services and reduce the vulnerability of people living with HIV.

Thanks to technical assistance, the capacities of over 90 community health workers providing HIV and STI prevention and support services to vulnerable people living with HIV were strengthened. The training covered SRH and prevention of HIV, GBV and COVID-19. The trainees received PPE and were deployed to HIV treatment and care centres to provide social support to people living with HIV who have been abandoned by their families, facilitate access to antiretroviral treatment, follow up with clients, establish linkages and monitor appointments, including viral load tests.

HUMAN RIGHTS, GENDER INEQUALITY AND GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

Technical support was provided to train 240 people from the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) community in six provinces on the sensitisation and mobilisation of their peers on human rights issues affecting key populations. The LGBTI community was also assisted to conduct intensive advocacy initiatives that led to the Government decriminalizing same-sex sexual relationships in Gabon in September 2020.

A collaborative advocacy by the Joint Team, civil society, and national partners and technical support for the revision of SRH laws led to the adoption of the Law No. 006/2021 of 6 September 2021 on the elimination of violence against women and the prohibition of their exclusion from the economy which exacerbates their risk of acquiring HIV.

The Joint Team provided technical and financial assistance for the rollout of an innovative 16-day national campaign to eliminate violence against women, which included awareness raising on HIV prevention information reaching approximately 86 000 people nationwide.

Technical assistance was provided to 10 GBV service delivery points to strengthen GBV case management and networking with GBV stakeholders in 8 provinces of Gabon. Several IEC materials and training tools on sexual and reproductive health and GBV were also produced to improve the capacity of non-governmental organisations to promote and protect the rights of women and girls affected by GBV. These include a manual for paralegals on GBV management and family mediation, anatomical charts, posters, brochures on menstrual hygiene, puberty and breast and cervical cancers.

CONTRIBUTION TO THE INTEGRATED SDG AGENDA

The Joint Team contributed significantly to the development of the new United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (UNSDCF) 2023-2027. During this process, the Joint Team shared lessons learned from the HIV response and applied the principle of *leaving no one behind*, to address inequalities, uphold civil society engagement and improve the legal environment, in line with the new Global AIDS Strategy. Furthermore, the Joint Team actively participated in national dialogues and in the reporting for the voluntary national review of progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to the United Nations High Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development.

In 2020-2021, the Joint Team implemented multiple programme activities strengthening Gabon's progress towards the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda. These include:

- SDG 2 (fight hunger): Support vulnerable populations, including people living with HIV, through agricultural skills and empowerment projects to ensure food self-sufficiency, well-being, and improved health outcomes among these groups.
- SDG 3 (access to health): Support HIV prevention programmes targeting populations who are at risk of HIV infection and treatment and care services of people living with HIV; decentralisation of comprehensive care for people living with HIV with the implementation of the *Treat All* strategy; unwavering support to the national response to COVID-19.
- SDG 5 (gender equality): Technical assistance for the Education Plus initiative; decriminalisation of same-sex sexual relationships, strengthening actions against GBV, and enactment of laws promoting gender equality.
- SDG 10 (reducing inequalities): implementation of various initiatives to reduce inequalities in access to services, both for prevention and management; capacity building for community health workers who deliver care and support services to people living with HIV.
- SDG 16 (justice and strong institutions): The introduction of community-led services in the national HIV response has triggered a review and revision of legal provisions governing citizen engagement, community service delivery, and lay providers.

- SDG 17 (partnership for achieving the goals): Innovative partnerships with the African Centre for Disease Control, the Rotary Club, civil society, and other development partners enabled a significant contribution to increasing access to HIV testing, prevention, treatment and care services, particularly viral load testing for vulnerable people living with HIV.

CHALLENGES AND LESSONS LEARNED

In Gabon, the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the health system and diverted attention from the HIV response, resulting in significant delays in the implementation of planned activities. The rapid reprogramming of activities during the pandemic allowed for the timely support to civil society organisations for the implementation of community-led responses. The integration of COVID-19 prevention into all HIV, SRH and GBV training and awareness-raising projects mitigated the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on HIV programming and further protected people living with or affected by HIV.

Decreasing national resources for HIV, coupled with weak quantification, monitoring and stock management, continue to instigate repeated stock-outs of HIV testing and treatment supplies in the country. Despite the availability of 15 GeneXpert machines in the country, viral load testing coverage remains low due to frequent stockouts of viral load testing reagents and the high cost of testing. Programmes that seek to track down people living with HIV who are lost to follow-up are currently underfunded and efforts should be made to boost treatment adherence and improve health outcomes for people living with HIV. Experiences have also shown that including people living with HIV in empowerment projects enables them to adhere to their treatment, regain confidence and thrive.

Access to HIV prevention information and services remains very low due to a variety of factors, including low national and donor resources for HIV prevention, high cost and inequitable distribution of outreach initiatives (between rural and urban areas), and the insufficient number and quality of community-led HIV prevention programmes.

In Gabon, key populations size estimations and the behaviours that put them at risk of HIV are not well known due to lack of relevant studies. HIV data in the district health information system (DHIS) are not up to date due to delayed routine reporting and remains costly for the National AIDS Programme.

Report available on the
UNAIDS Results and Transparency Portal

open.unaids.org