

# BELARUS

*Report prepared by the Joint UN Team on AIDS*

## JOINT TEAM

UNHCR, UNICEF, UNDP, UNFPA, UNODC, WHO, WORLD BANK, UNAIDS  
SECRETARIAT, IOM

## JOINT PROGRAMME CONTRIBUTIONS AND RESULTS IN 2020-2021

*The Joint Team in Belarus made valuable contributions to expanding access to and delivery of HIV testing and treatment services despite the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Representatives of nongovernmental organizations were trained, HIV testing kits were procured, and an online health advisory platform was launched to reach more people, including pregnant women and their families with HIV testing and counselling services. A pilot outreach programme was rolled out in youth-friendly centres to increase demand and access to tailored sexual and reproductive health and HIV services among adolescent and young people in Minsk. Virtual and in-person trainings on HIV and sexual and reproductive health were conducted for more than 1200 secondary school special education teachers, psychologists, and healthcare providers in six regions and Minsk. Intensive advocacy by the Joint Team led to the inclusion of pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) in the draft national HIV diagnostics and treatment guidelines and the training of health professionals and representatives of civil society organizations on identification of potential clients and management of PrEP. Technical support was provided to identify and assess the needs and barriers to HIV services among people who use drugs. The Joint Team also supported an analysis of the online drug market including the variety of drugs sold and the impact of COVID-19 on this industry to find ways of using it to deliver information and promote harm reduction, and other essential HIV and health services. Support and HIV services were provided to people who use new psychoactive substances through social media platforms while financial assistance was provided to people who use drugs to attend their daily opioid agonist therapy appointments during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Joint Team worked with the Government and development partners to conduct an allocative efficiency modelling analysis which informed the national strategic plan and grant proposals for the HIV response.*

## HIV TESTING, TREATMENT, AND INTEGRATION WITH HEALTH SERVICES

In 2020-2021, the Joint Team organized emergency procurement of 26 000 rapid HIV testing kits (US\$ 90 000) and covered delivery (US\$ 9300) of antiretroviral medicines – 6000 packages of Tenvir and Viraday – to mitigate global logistical challenges and avoid stockouts for the HIV response in Belarus during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Joint Team also supported the training of 1051 staff members of nongovernmental organizations on the delivery of community-based integrated voluntary HIV testing and counselling services, social support, and case management services. Additionally, 190 healthcare providers from the newly established

multidisciplinary team in Minsk City Infectious Diseases Hospital were trained to improve their capacity to deliver Opioid Agonist Therapy (OAT) and antiretroviral treatment services for people living with HIV and tuberculosis co-infection.

In collaboration with the Ministry of Health and Mama PRO—a charitable organization working on maternal health—the Joint Team developed and launched an online school that provides comprehensive health advice and promotes HIV testing among pregnant women and their families. The online school is expected to reach an estimated 40 000 pregnant women annually, including women living in rural areas and women with disabilities.

The Joint Team conducted training for 180 staff and outreach workers of nongovernmental organizations working with people living with HIV and key populations, and medical specialists from regional and district centres to improve their understanding of the COVID-19 vaccines. This training raised awareness on COVID-19 vaccination, and covered the following items: advantages of vaccination, safety for people living with HIV, possible interactions with antiretroviral medicines, risks of severe COVID-19 infection among people living with HIV if non-vaccinated, etc.

### **HIV PREVENTION AND SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE**

The Joint Team supported the implementation of a pilot outreach programme in two Youth-Friendly Health Centres in Minsk to increase demand and access to sexual and reproductive health (SRH) and HIV services among adolescents and young people including from key population groups. The outreach programme comprised engagement of adolescents, motivational counselling, establishment of community spaces for adolescents aimed at improving access to youth-friendly HIV and SRH services. These interventions helped to reach 7781 adolescents and young people aged 10-24 years in 2020-2021, a 231% increase in coverage of youth-friendly HIV and SRH services compared to the initial plan.

The Belarusian State Medical University was supported for the adaptation and implementation of a pilot online SRH course, which included HIV prevention for general practitioners and obstetrician-gynaecologists to improve the quality of SRH service delivery in healthcare facilities.

In 2020-2021, the Joint Team partnered with the Belarus Association of UNESCO Clubs (BelAU)—a nongovernmental organization working on youth and education—conducted offline and online trainings for 1248 secondary school special education teachers, psychologists, and healthcare providers in six oblasts (regions) and Minsk on HIV and SRH. The training sought to raise the awareness of the participants about various issues, including addressing HIV-related myths; living with HIV; HIV prevention, testing, and counselling; adolescent sexual and reproductive health; new psychoactive substances use and improvement of referral pathways to youth-friendly health centres for young people including young key populations.

### **HIV PREVENTION AMONG KEY POPULATIONS**

The Joint Team conducted a series of seminars and trainings for more than 260 health professionals, lecturers, and civil society representatives from seven regions to improve their understanding of HIV pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP). The trainings focussed on identification of potential clients, as well as prescription and management of PrEP. Following intensive advocacy and technical support, PrEP has been included in the draft national HIV diagnostics and treatment guidelines, which is currently going through the approval process at the Ministry of Health.

Technical assistance was provided to the Government to conduct a study to identify the primary needs of people who use new psychoactive substances as well as barriers preventing them from accessing HIV-related services. Following these recommendations, the Joint Team

developed an electronic guide for HIV harm reduction programmes (<https://nps-info.org/>) and animated learning videos to help users navigate this online harm reduction services portal. Some of the recommendations were also included in the Global Fund-supported extended package of HIV prevention services tailored for people who use drugs.

The Joint Team further supported a regional study on the impact of COVID-19 on internet drug trade, including in Belarus, to understand the scope and variety of drugs sold through the internet. The research also sought to identify popular social media platforms and channels in Belarus that can be used to disseminate accurate information, mobilize communities, and deliver HIV, harm reduction, and other essential health services.

In 2021, the Joint Team conducted training for six web-outreach consultants to improve their capacity to reach and support people who use new psychoactive substances from three Fast Track cities: Minsk, Salihorsk and Svetlahorsk. As a result, 60 people who use new psychoactive substances were reached with relevant information through 13 specific social network channels that use the web-outreach network developed by the Joint Team and 29 people agreed to take HIV testing, of whom nine people tested HIV positive and were referred to treatment services.

The Joint Team supported eight people who use drugs from Vitebsk for eight months with their daily transportation expenses to OAT clinics ensuring the continuity of services during the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, 3500 face masks were procured and distributed to people who use drugs to enable them to safely attend their daily appointments at OAT centres.

As a result of advocacy and technical support, the Government agreed to include alternative measures to the incarceration for people who use drugs in the national health programme 2021-2025 to ensure the continuity of HIV and harm reduction services among this group. Furthermore, the Joint Team successfully advocated for the revision and adoption of the national OAT regulations, which allowed the implementation of take-home OAT.

## HUMAN RIGHTS, GENDER, STIGMA, AND DISCRIMINATION

The Stigma Index 2.0 study was conducted to identify the impact of HIV-related stigma and discrimination and human rights violations targeting people living with HIV. The study revealed that over the past 12 months, 21.4% of the respondents had experienced some kind of discrimination and stigmatization from others for reasons related to their HIV status. Also, 18.5% of respondents had experienced violations of their rights within the last 12 months, and only a third of the respondents (32.8%) have information about the existence of laws in the Republic of Belarus which protect people living with HIV from discrimination. Therefore, findings highlighted both an insufficient level of awareness of rights among people living with HIV and an insufficient level of awareness regarding mechanisms in place to protect them.

The Joint Team developed educational materials targeting media professionals on HIV and harm reduction, including materials entitled "*How to write about HIV and not to harm anyone*"; and "*Drugs and the people who use them: how to write correctly and not to harm anyone*". The target audience included journalists, as well as students of the Faculty of Journalism at Belarusian State University. The media materials can also be used by the general population and communities of key populations and groups vulnerable to HIV. A mini-course on HIV-neutral language was also developed for an online educational platform (<https://minsk.cityoflearning.eu/opportunities?config=playlists>) to increase the capacity of media representatives in covering HIV- and drug-related topics, making correct references to key populations, avoiding hate speech, and disseminating reliable facts and information about HIV and drug use.

The Ministry of Health was supported in finalizing a Legal Environment Assessment (LEA) in the context of HIV aimed at identifying the challenges national legislation pose to people living with or affected by HIV in accessing services. Following the assessment, proposals were developed in partnership with the Belarusian association of people living with – "People Plus" - for the

repeal of Articles 157 and 158 of the Criminal Code that directly and indirectly affect criminal liability for the transmission of HIV and other sexually transmitted infections.

The Joint Team provided technical and financial support to the Belarus Anti-AIDS Network (BelSet AntiSPID) —a nongovernmental organization supporting people living with HIV and tuberculosis for the operationalization of the Human Rights Monitoring Tool ([www.hiv-prava.by](http://www.hiv-prava.by)). The tool provides free legal support and protection for vulnerable and key populations. In 2020, 50 free consultations were delivered through this tool.

In February 2020, the Joint Team organized and financially supported the representatives of the Investigative Committee and Prosecutor's General Office to participate in a study tour to Serbia. The main objective of the visit was to study Serbia's drug policies to improve the capacity of relevant policy makers in developing, promoting, and supporting effective national drug-related policies and strategies in Belarus; and ensure the Belarus' compliance with international standards and drug conventions. The study trip directly contributed to the inclusion of drug-related crimes committed by minors in the national law on amnesty.

The Joint Team provided advisory and technical assistance for the development of the Sixth National Action Plan on Gender Equality 2021-2025 ensuring comprehensive focus on advancement of SRH and right, gender equality, promotion of gender-responsive family-friendly workplaces, national response to domestic and gender-based violence at national and local level. The Joint Team also organized six trainings for more than 90 participants to improve their knowledge and skillsets on gender audit and delivery of gender sensitive services. Participants were healthcare, social and outreach workers, as well as programme staff from nongovernmental organizations providing HIV services. Trainings were conducted in Minsk and six oblast cities.

## INVESTMENT AND EFFICIENCY

Technical assistance was provided to the Country Coordinating Mechanism (CCM) to develop the Global Fund concept note securing over US\$ 32.2 million for the national HIV, tuberculosis, and malaria responses for the 2022-2024 grant period. A total of US\$ 13 million was allocated for the HIV response, particularly for the scale up of HIV prevention services among key populations, case management and adherence counselling for people living with HIV, and integration of HIV services.

In 2020, the Joint Team partnered with the Government, the Global Fund, and Burnet Institute in conducting an allocative efficiency modelling analysis to assess optimization of resources earmarked for various HIV programmes in Belarus. The simulation results guided the national Strategic Action Plan for HIV/AIDS 2021-2025 and the Global Fund concept note for the 2022-2024 grant period. Moreover, the study process helped to strengthen the capacity of relevant personnel for the optimization of HIV investments using the Optima Model.

Technical assistance was provided for the analysis of the sentinel epidemiological surveillance system which allowed the calculation of key population groups size estimations including among people who inject drugs (80 000), gay men and other men who have sex with men (32 000), and sex workers (18 600). Prevalence of HIV was found at 22.7% among people who use drugs, 5.8% among gay men and other men who have sex with men, and 9.7% among sex workers. The results will be used to inform HIV programmes tailored to key populations. Meanwhile the Joint Team facilitated three training sessions for 80 healthcare providers to improve their skills on the usage of epidemiological data for planning, monitoring, and evaluation of HIV and sexual transmitted infection prevention programmes.

## CONTRIBUTION TO THE INTEGRATED SDG AGENDA

Apart from the major contribution to the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 3 "Good Health and Well Being", the activities of the Joint Plan 2020-2021 greatly contributed to the achievement of the SDGs 5 (Gender equality), 10 (Reduced inequalities) and 16 (Peace, justice, and strong institutions). The Joint Team is actively supporting the implementation of the United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (UNSDCF) 2021-2025.

Besides programmes aimed preventing HIV, tuberculosis and hepatitis and related morbidity, the Joint Team is supporting implementation of a comprehensive set of activities on environment-related health monitoring and risk management and prevention of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) by means of reducing the consumption of alcohol, tobacco, narcotic drugs, psychotropic substances and their analogues, and salt, and through promoting diverse and healthy diets and increasing physical activities. As such, important efforts were deployed in 2020-2021 for teaching healthy lifestyles and safe living skills (including in Chernobyl-affected areas), improving sexual, reproductive, and mental health; and improving the healthcare system, especially at the primary care level, for the prevention and control of NCDs, HIV, tuberculosis, and hepatitis.

## CHALLENGES AND LESSONS LEARNED

The COVID-19 pandemic and the political situation that followed the 2020 presidential election presented significant challenges in the HIV response in Belarus. The pandemic forced cancellations and delays in several programme activities, including trainings, regional conferences, and support missions in the country. While virtual capacity building sessions allowed the Joint Team to reach its target participants, some loss in efficiency was noted.

The political situation resulted in quite severe economic consequences including state budget cuts for healthcare, and consequently, loss of funding for HIV, particularly for services targeting key populations. Overall, the socio-political situation limited the possibilities of cooperation with state bodies and decision makers regarding any amendments to legislation. The space for nongovernmental organizations and media engagement for the HIV response is shrinking. For example, further development and functioning of the Human Rights Monitoring Tool ([www.hiv-prava.by](http://www.hiv-prava.by)) was halted due to the closure of BelSet ANTI AIDS. The important migration of qualified medical personnel further increases the risk of service interruption, particularly for people living with HIV and key populations.

The mandatory procedure for registration of international financing of programmes in Belarus became more complicated and lengthier—the process can take up to nine months. Additionally, the unpredictability of the registration results, where a project can be approved or not for implementation, continues to significantly limit the capabilities of national partners, predominantly nongovernmental organizations in the implementation of project activities and undermines the sustainability of many HIV-related services for key and vulnerable populations in the country.

The insufficient commitment of national partners to the implementation of comprehensive HIV prevention policies continues to delay approval of the Joint Team-led comprehensive prevention recommendations service planning, implementation and monitoring of programmes targeting key populations.

Lack of government-led holistic approach for the resocialization of former prisoners and people who used drugs continues to subject them to stigma and discrimination. This also puts women from vulnerable groups at risk of HIV infection and gender-based violence.

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