

CONGO, REPUBLIC OF THE

Report prepared by the Joint UN Team on AIDS

PROGRESS TOWARDS THE FAST-TRACK TARGETS

COUNTRY PRIORITIES/ TARGETS BY END OF 2021	STATUS	RESULTS, END OF 2020
By the end of 2021, access to HIV and tuberculosis testing and treatment is strengthened among the general population, adolescents and young people, and key populations.	ON TRACK	By end of 2020, 318 out of 665 (48%) health facilities nationwide offered voluntary HIV counselling and testing services, and 104 facilities offered HIV treatment and care services (PNLS 2020).
By the end of 2021, antiretroviral treatment coverage increased reaching 18% among women, and 36% among children.	SLOW PROGRESS	Antiretroviral treatment coverage has increased from 10% in 2019 to 13.55% by the end of 2020. Paediatric treatment coverage was at 13% among children living with HIV aged 0- 14 years (PNLS 2020).
By 2021 new infections decreased to less than 46% among key populations and other vulnerable groups (adolescents and young people of both sexes, female sex workers and their clients, men who have sex with men).	SLOW PROGRESS	Further driven by the COVID-19 pandemic, new HIV infections are increasing in Congo, from 9200 in 2018 and 9700 in 2019 to 10 000 in 2020. New HIV infections in 2020 were recorded among 1400 and 3200 adolescents (10-19 years) and young people (15-24 years) respectively (GAM 2021).
By the end of 2021, policies, interventions and services aimed at reducing stigma and discrimination, removing obstacles for accessing HIV services, reducing gender inequalities, and addressing gender-based violence (GBV) are strengthened.	ON TRACK	Technical assistance was provided to support the development and implementation of legislation relating to HIV and the protection of the rights of women and people living with HIV. Additional initiatives towards reducing HIV-related stigma and discrimination and gender-based violence have been integrated in the Global Fund grant proposal, for implementation in 2021- 2023.
By the end of 2021, quality data are generated, and innovative domestic resources as well as resources from international donors are mobilized to ensure the sustainability of the national response.	ACHIEVED	Technical and financial support was provided for the preparation of Congo's successful proposal to the Global Fund, securing € 27 458 177 for 2021-2023.

JOINT TEAM

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

JOINT PROGRAMME CONTRIBUTIONS AND RESULTS IN 2020

In 2020, HIV testing and treatment in Congo was supported through capacity building interventions in integrated health centres, and training for community health workers in targeted areas such as Pool, Brazzaville and Pointe Noire. Prevention of mother-to-child transmission (PMTCT) services and early infant diagnosis were scaled up, supported by technical assistance and equipment procured by the Joint Team. Community outreach in screening and prevention for key populations was implemented despite the difficulties presented by the COVID-19 pandemic. Lastly, improving the protection of human rights, particularly of vulnerable children with specific needs, and raising awareness on violence against women, were areas of strong focus in 2020.

TESTING AND TREATMENT**TECHNICAL SUPPORT; COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT; CAPACITY BUILDING**

In 2020, supporting the integration of health care services for people living with HIV into the first-level health structures, the Joint Team provided technical assistance in building the capacity of community and health workers through various skills trainings. A comprehensive training on HIV/AIDS diagnosis, care and management was delivered to 15 staff working in the different health facilities of Plateaux to improve their capacity in the management of HIV and monitoring tool usage. Moreover, training on behavioural change was also delivered for 420 community workers in preparation for outreach missions to key populations in communities in Pool, Brazzaville and Pointe Noire. These workers also conducted home-visits to deliver nutritional assistance to malnourished people living with HIV which contributed to ensuring their adherence to treatment or readmission in case of lost to follow-up.

The Joint Team also provided support to Congo's HIV testing and treatment efforts. Eight hundred forty-six patients were received in various counselling and testing centres last year, including 459 refugees and 387 people from host communities. In addition, more than 400 people from key populations were reached with HIV testing services through a mobile outreach strategy in Pointe-Noire and Brazzaville, including sex workers, their clients, and men who have sex with men. Those who tested positive were referred to HIV treatment.

Through advocacy, and financial and logistical assistance, the Joint Team supported the procurement of antiretroviral drugs and laboratory reagents for virological screening and monitoring. This effort guaranteed the availability of antiretrovirals for both adults and children in 2020 with a total value of US\$ 838 108. Additionally, technical support was provided to update and disseminate national guidelines on HIV and tuberculosis diagnosis and treatment to all stakeholders and care sites.

PMTCT COVERAGE**TECHNICAL SUPPORT; CAPACITY BUILDING**

With guidance from the Joint Team, the 2020-2023 operational plan for scaling-up early infant HIV diagnosis at the Point of Care was developed and validated, along with its product quality assurance plan and monitoring tools. In addition, guidelines for the implementation of task-shifting in PMTCT services were finalized and approved. A total of 50 midwives in the departments of Pointe Noire and Brazzaville were trained on task delegation and spousal counselling.

Furthermore, the capacity building drive for PMTCT also included the training of 22 health workers from Bétou Integrated Health Centre on primary prevention and care, and support for HIV-infected women and their families. These activities were supported through the procurement of Five Gene Xpert machines to strengthen laboratory systems including early diagnosis and virological monitoring for PMTCT. Interventions supported by the Joint Team in Bétou contributed to achieving the following results in the region: i) the proportion of pregnant women seen at their first antenatal care who tested for HIV increased from 21.04% (274/1302) in 2019 to 90.77% (1289/1420) in 2020; and ii) the proportion of HIV-positive pregnant women on antiretroviral therapy (ART) increased from 50% (3/6) in 2019 to 100% (16/16) in 2020.

Through support provided to the non-governmental organization Terre Sans Frontières, 671 pregnant women (including 231 refugees) were counselled and tested for HIV during their antenatal care visits; nine people were found HIV positive, of which eight have begun ART.

HIV PREVENTION **TECHNICAL SUPPORT; CAPACITY BUILDING**

The national strategy 2020-2024 for the prevention of HIV in adolescents was finalized and validated by the Ministry of Health, with strong technical and financial support, and guidance from the Joint Team.

Twenty-six leaders from communities of sex workers and men who have sex with men received training to build their capacity on HIV prevention and stigma and discrimination. They subsequently reached over 600 sex workers, their clients, and men who have sex with men in Brazzaville and Pointe-Noire with HIV prevention information and sensitization including distribution of nearly 2000 male and female condoms.

In Pointe-Noire, 30 social supervisors from state structures and NGOs participated in a two-day training on prevention of HIV and GBV among vulnerable young people with specific needs. A focus group of seven young people with disabilities was included as part of this training session.

GENDER INEQUALITY AND HUMAN RIGHTS **TECHNICAL SUPPORT; CAPACITY BUILDING; ADVOCACY**

In 2020, a total of 359 health workers and community relays were trained on GBV by the Joint Team, resulting in 40 000 people being sensitized on this topic through discussions and community radio messages. A total of 391 victims of GBV received psychological and socio-economic support provided by the Joint Team.

In collaboration with the Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of Health and Population, and the Ministry of the Promotion of Women, technical assistance was provided to support the implementation of the 2011 Law No.30, relating to the HIV response and the protection of the rights of women and people living with HIV. Directives were drafted in 2020 to support the application of the law for further development and dissemination in 2021.

Finally, technical assistance was provided for the launching of a gender assessment of the national HIV response in Congo, to be concluded in 2021. The results of the gender assessment will support national authorities, partners and the Joint Team in further addressing gender inequalities in the HIV response.

STRATEGIC INFORMATION AND SUSTAINABILITY **TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE; RESOURCE MOBILIZATION**

Through technical and financial support from the Joint Team, processes related to the generation of strategic information, data management and completion of accountability requirements were strengthened. For instance, assistance was provided to guide the integration of HIV and tuberculosis data in the national DHIS2 platform, moving from paper-based forms to an online integrated system.

The Joint Team continued to provide support to the national authorities to mobilize resources for the HIV response and ensure its sustainability, including through the submission of a successful grant proposal to the Global Fund for the 2021-2023 period; total of € 27 458 177 was secured to strengthen the HIV and tuberculosis responses in Congo.

CONTRIBUTION TO THE COVID-19 RESPONSE **TECHNICAL SUPPORT; FOSTERING PARTNERSHIPS; CAPACITY BUILDING**

In 2020, the Joint Team strongly contributed to the national and UN-led response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Technical support and guidance provided by the Joint Team led to additional investments of € 3 271 139 for the country's COVID-19 response under the Global Fund COVID-19 Response Mechanism (C19RM).

Communication materials on COVID-19 prevention measures and HIV prevention and treatment were developed and widely disseminated, encouraging people to access COVID and HIV services without fear of stigma and discrimination. In addition, in collaboration with a civil society organization, 70 leaders were trained in Brazzaville, Pointe-Noire and Dolisie, leading to nearly 5500 adolescents and young people being sensitized on COVID-19 prevention through outreach activities and workshops.

Personal protective equipment was procured to enable health workers to continue to provide antenatal care services safely to pregnant women, women of childbearing age, and young girls during the COVID-19 pandemic. Support was also provided for the creation of income-generating activities by vulnerable and at-risk women and girls affected by COVID-19, identifying women living with HIV assessing needs, and providing nutritional assistance.

The Joint Team also supported the capacity building of the Centre for Emergency Public Health Operations and the National Council on AIDS, STIs and Epidemics in managing COVID-19 alerts, through the training of 48 call centre operators and database managers. In addition, the Joint Team donated five computers to these organizations to collect, process and share updated epidemic information and inform control strategies more efficiently.

CONTRIBUTION TO THE INTEGRATED SDG AGENDA

In 2020, the Joint Team continued the nutritional support programme for children aged 6 to 59 months and pregnant and breastfeeding women, including people living with HIV/AIDS, through the integrated health centres in the Pool department. This contributed to the following results: 89.72% of pregnant or breastfeeding women (21% of whom were people living with HIV) and 98.8% of children aged between 6 and 59 years (17.9% of whom were living with HIV) treated in integrated health centres were declared cured of malnutrition; a total of 154 metric tonnes of food was distributed through the programme.

Furthermore, the field visits to 210 health centres built the capacity of health providers in data collection and compliance with the national protocol on malnutrition management.

PERSISTING AND EMERGING CHALLENGES AND BOTTLENECKS	KEY FUTURE ACTIONS TO RESPOND TO CHALLENGES AND UNBLOCK BOTTLENECKS
<p>Due to the national financial crisis, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a low domestic funding of the HIV national response.</p>	<p>Continue to mobilize resources for the HIV response in Congo, and provide support for the implementation of the 2021-2023 Global Fund grant.</p>
<p>HIV infections are increasing in Congo, fuelled by GBV. In 2020, there were 5900 new HIV infections among adult females compared to 2100 among adult males (GAM 2021).</p>	<p>Continue to support community-based approaches to HIV testing to better reach sex workers and men who have sex with men, including through updating the mapping of services.</p> <p>Ensure greater engagement of young people and adolescents in the fight against HIV and GBV, with a focus on youth with special needs.</p> <p>Support the finalization of the gender assessment, and the dissemination of findings for awareness raising and advocacy purposes.</p>
<p>Despite an increasing number of pregnant women under ART (865 in 2020 compared to 480 in 2018), mother-to-child transmission of HIV is still high (32% in 2020, GAM 2021). This is partly due to the high levels of malnutrition in the country.</p>	<p>Support development and implementation of initiatives to improve the nutritional knowledge and raise awareness on GBV among pregnant and breastfeeding women attending health centres.</p> <p>Through their integration in the cash-transfer programme, provide nutritional assistance to vulnerable pregnant and breastfeeding women living with HIV in Pointe Noire and Brazzaville.</p>
<p>Persisting high levels of stigma and discrimination hamper the HIV response in Congo. Application of the HIV Law from 2011 is still lagging behind.</p>	<p>Roll out awareness-raising campaigns against HIV-related stigma and discrimination, including mass and targeted trainings.</p> <p>Support the dissemination of the new implementing decree for the application of the 2011 Law n°30.</p> <p>Support legal centres and clinics specialized in assisting survivors of violence and human rights violations.</p>

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