

# DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

*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
Contribute to the increase of the number of adults and children who know their HIV status, are on ARV and have an undetectable viral load from 82-68-56 in 2019 to 85-85-85 in 2021.	<b>ON TRACK</b>	Care cascade by December 2020 is 82-51-49 (GAM 2021).
By 2021, contribute to eliminate new HIV infections among children from 14%% in 2019 to 2% in 2021.	<b>NO PROGRESS</b>	High rates of vertical HIV transmission persist, with no change to new HIV infections in children (around 17% in 2020, GAM 2021).
By 2021, contribute to a 10% increase in the coverage of combination prevention programmes, using innovative approaches and models of service delivery.	<b>ON TRACK</b>	Combination prevention programme coverage using innovative approaches and models of service delivery increased on average by 7% between 2019-2020; from 69.9% to 77.6% among sex workers; from 81.6% to 83% among men who have sex with men; from 49.3% to 77.6% among transgender people. This increase is not yet sufficient to impact the reduction of new infections (programme data, 2020).
By 2021, contribute to an increase of 10% on demand for condoms.	<b>ON TRACK</b>	An increase in condom distribution in the places of intervention of the UEPA Strategy on contraceptive security has been observed. In San Cristóbal, condom delivery increased by 38% compared with 2019 (UNFPA programme data); in other provinces, the noted decrease is consistent with the decrease in visits to health services in general, due to the COVID-19 pandemic.
By 2021, contribute to an increase of the number of victims of sexual abuse receiving post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP) to 20% coverage.	<b>ON TRACK</b>	Latest data from 2018 show that 18.4% of women in Dominican Republic have suffered from gender-based violence (GBV) (ENESIM-2018). There are no official figures on how many women victims of sexual violence receive PEP kits; a study is planned for 2021.

**JOINT TEAM**

UNICEF, WFP, UNDP, UNFPA, UNODC, WHO-PAHO, UNAIDS SECRETARIAT

**JOINT PROGRAMME CONTRIBUTIONS AND RESULTS IN 2020**

*Testing and treatment programmes in Dominican Republic were supported in 2020 through advocacy and capacity building of health service providers, as well as provision of nutrition training to strengthen treatment adherence. Coverage of combination prevention services significantly increased for sex workers during the year. Overall, it has expanded across key populations and young people through key strategic interventions such as, transforming a pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) pilot into a national strategy, strengthening and expanding the scope of sexual and reproductive health (SRH) programmes, and creating greater consensus and cooperation across sectors and among government agencies, civil society and other partners working in HIV-related services. The Joint Team's focus on ensuring human rights for all resulted in a range of advances, including an assessment on the health service needs of women, greater inclusion for LGBTI people, improved access to social protection for key populations and people living with HIV, and increased citizens' awareness of the proposed General Law of Equality and Non-Discrimination.*

**TESTING AND TREATMENT****ADVOCACY; TECHNICAL SUPPORT; CAPACITY BUILDING**

The Joint Team continued to provide support to the national HIV/STI programme (DIGECITSS) for the procurement of dual HIV and Syphilis testing kits, to be distributed mainly to non-governmental organizations working at community level. A total of 3550 testing units were procured in 2020.

An opinion survey was conducted on the quality of care services and the impact of ARV shortages to 108 users in 34 Comprehensive Care Service (CCS) units in different public health centres. The results were presented to health authorities to inform their future decisions. Additionally, a survey was initiated to gather data for a comprehensive analysis of cross-border HIV programmes with Haiti, with an emphasis on PEPFAR programmes. The aim of this analysis was to strengthen coordination and synergies in the context of the complex migration dynamic between Haiti and the Dominican Republic. This survey will feed into the development of a binational joint action plan that identifies issues of common interest and synergies in the area of HIV.

A community-led monitoring (CLM) initiative was launched with technical assistance from the Joint Team. A total of 97 people from key government bodies, civil society, UN agencies and association of people living with HIV participated in a webinar held in December 2020 to promote CLM. In collaboration with PEPFAR, technical support from the Joint Team led to the selection of the Center for Sustainable Development (CEDESO) as the community-based organization that will implement CLM. To supervise the integration of CLM in the national HIV response, a monitoring committee was formed, with a first meeting planned for early 2021.

In 2020, the Joint Team supported the development of the Undetectable = Untransmittable Campaign (U=U)<sup>1</sup> —an awareness-raising project around the importance of suppressing viral load, targeting prioritised key populations and health service providers. To this end, a monitoring committee (comprising main government actors in the health sector, international cooperation agencies, civil society organisations and representatives of people living with HIV) has been established for strategy development in 2021.

Treatment adherence was supported through the provision of nutrition training for people with HIV. Technical assistance on food and nutrition issues was provided to key partners, which resulted in strengthening knowledge and capacities of 15 peer counsellors and 200 families affected by HIV. The CCS in Mao was supported to train 60 new people with HIV in diversification of diet through vegetable farming. Nutritious food kits were distributed to 52 women and 8 men and their families and 50 youths and adolescents. Support was also provided to facilitate women's access to urban and community gardens to grow nutritious food; 12 workshops were carried out with 260 participants.

### **ELIMINATION OF MOTHER-TO-CHILD TRANSMISSION (EMTCT) POLICY ADVICE; TECHNICAL SUPPORT**

A pilot project for the integration of vertical transmission of HIV and Congenital Syphilis into regular obstetric care was started in two provinces in the east (Higuey and La Romana) and a municipality of the main province, Santo Domingo Este.

Support was provided to DIGECITSS and the National Health Service in conducting operational research on the route that pregnant women follow in hospitals when they make their first consultation, in 20 CCS hospitals. Results of this survey indicated that the majority of pregnant women left the hospital at their first visit without receiving any HIV test, or that they experienced a delay between testing and starting treatment. Based on these findings, the care route for first-time pregnant woman was revised.

### **PREVENTION POLICY DIALOGUE; TECHNICAL SUPPORT; PARTNERSHIPS; ADVOCACY; CAPACITY BUILDING**

A PrEP pilot project was expanded into a national strategy, integrated into HIV plans and extended in its reach to key populations. Support was provided to the Ministry of Health in the development of PrEP guidelines and in the expansion of the strategy in health centres. As of November 2020, PrEP was offered to 1360 people from key populations in six health services (doubling the provision from 2019).

Technical assistance was provided to create a national strategy for HIV and sexually transmitted infections (STIs) prevention and care for people who use drugs, focusing on drug resistance and designing a harm reduction training strategy that was first applied to 90 healthcare workers with success.

The Joint Team developed the 'Prevention Table' —designed as a space for information exchange, coordination and consensus-building— to create intersectoral plans that promote increased financing and improvement of the quality of interventions in combined prevention. Terms of Reference were created to manage the Table and the Advocacy Plan, which were both accepted by government bodies, CSOs and UN agencies.

---

<sup>1</sup> a scientifically proven concept which refers to people living with HIV who achieve and maintain an undetectable viral load—the amount of HIV in the blood—by taking ART daily as prescribed, cannot sexually transmit the virus to others.

Technical assistance was provided to the Ministry of Health to strengthen and expand SRH prevention programmes, including HIV among young people through the expansion of the Special Unit for the Promotion of Contraceptives (UEPA) to 66 first-level care centres. Male condom dispensers were installed and 43 community leaders in San Juan, Ocoa, Elías Piña provinces and Boca Chica were trained to dispense condoms and other contraceptives efficiently, following the strategy adopted in San Cristóbal which has seen a 38% increase in condom distribution, unlike other areas which decreased during COVID-19. Funds were mobilised from an international NGO to design and pilot an electronic and online supervision instrument, for provincial health directorates to monitor the quality of adolescent care services.

The Ministry of Health, the National Health Service and the Autonomous University of Santo Domingo were supported to design a comprehensive virtual training programme in adolescent health; development is pending approval. The Joint Team also contributed to the development of the baseline to identify barriers to access sexual and reproductive health services for adolescents in first level care centres in the Metropolitan Regional Service.

Condom use and STI, HIV and AIDS prevention messages were disseminated on social networks through the 'Tu no ta pa eso' strategy. 70 000 condoms and brochures were distributed during a Condom Day Celebration held this year at the Autonomous University of Santo Domingo.

#### **GENDER INEQUALITY, GBV AND HUMAN RIGHTS** POLICY ADVICE; TECHNICAL SUPPORT; COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT; CAPACITY BUILDING

Technical assistance was provided for the production of infographic posters communicating messages on COVID-19 and the associated risk of violence against women. Three thousand posters were produced and distributed among health personnel, communities, GBV survivors, and 1000 information sheets for decision makers.

The Joint Team developed a baseline study identifying the needs of women, including young women, regarding HIV and resilient health systems, which will serve as a framework for the development of a gender and HIV assessment of the national response.

Technical assistance and coordination support was provided for overcoming human rights barriers suffered by people living with HIV and key populations, including support for the LGBTI group in organizing the Pride Day campaign, LGBTI Film Festival, and the World AIDS Day 2020 campaign. This included production and dissemination of 142 videos and publishing of 13 newspaper articles, reaching 440 308 people through social networks and 8.7 million people through national radio, television and press.

The Joint Team provided support for the Management Committee of 'Quiero una ley' (I want a law) aiming to sensitize the general population, and the Permanent Commission of Human Rights and Members of the Congress on inequalities, exclusion and discrimination, and increase the awareness of citizens and decision-makers to advocate for the approval of the General Law of Equality and Non-Discrimination.

#### **CONTRIBUTION TO THE COVID-19 RESPONSE** POLICY ADVICE; TECHNICAL SUPPORT; COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT; CAPACITY BUILDING

Technical assistance was provided to the Ministry of Public Health in the development of a clinical guideline for the supply and dispensing of ARVs during COVID-19, establishing guidelines to protect and facilitate health care for people living with HIV, and in the collection and monitoring of information that measures the interruption of services during COVID-19. Results show a reduction of 10% in ARV services between February and May 2020, which then started to increase again.

Advocacy and technical assistance ensured the inclusion of people living with HIV in social protection programmes created during COVID-19. 15 002 people (21%) living with HIV and their relatives were included in three programmes created to support people in informal work and people suffering from income loss due to COVID-19, as well as in the 'Stay at Home' campaign.

Food and nutrition packs, as well as prevention supplies and hygiene kits and PPE were distributed through a number of channels. About 434 nutritionally vulnerable families and families with members living with HIV benefited from 15-day food rations and other supplies. Additionally, 259 people living with HIV and those classified as nutritionally vulnerable were supported with food rations. Nutritional supplements were likewise distributed to 6800 people living with and affected by HIV. 175 food rations, 233 280 condoms, 90 000 lubricants, and 60 cookbooks on healthy cooking were provided to people living with HIV and their families.

An information and communication strategy was created and implemented, focused on supporting people living with HIV and key populations on relevant policies, programmes and services in the context of COVID-19 and HIV, reaching 8568 people through social networks. In addition, 2282 COVID-19 prevention and hygiene kits were distributed by the Joint Team to people living with HIV, pregnant women and their newborns, patients with substance disorders, LGBTI people and sex workers.

A webinar on providing support on handling emotional stress and coping with the COVID-19 crisis was conducted, intended for people living with HIV, health personnel, and the general public. Seventy-three people participated, and a further 90 viewed a recording shared via YouTube.

### CONTRIBUTION TO THE INTEGRATED SDG AGENDA

In the Dominican Republic, the Joint Team is working under the framework of the United Nations Development Assistance Framework (UNDAF) for 2018-2022 to achieve the 2030 Agenda. Despite health, humanitarian and development challenges, the UN Country Team is supporting an integrated action to ensure access to health services and social protection for all; protect employment and support the economic sector; promote sustainability and resilience of the national systems through the development and review of public policies, advocacy and technical assistance.

PERSISTING AND EMERGING CHALLENGES AND BOTTLENECKS	KEY FUTURE ACTIONS TO RESPOND TO CHALLENGES AND UNBLOCK BOTTLENECKS
<p>Due to the COVID-19 pandemic quarantine and prevention measures, access to many essential health services were limited. These measures also caused delays in addressing training issues and the review of standards and care strategies for testing and treatment.</p>	<p>Support roll out of a campaign aimed at the people living with HIV and key populations, with an emphasis on the Undetectable = Untransmissible theme.</p> <p>Continue to support Haiti-Dominican Republic initiatives to strengthen coordination and synergies in addressing the needs of the migrants' population.</p> <p>Advocate and provide technical assistance for the participation of the beneficiary communities in both the monitoring and evaluation processes of HIV services supported by the PEPFAR programme.</p> <p>Strengthen networks and improve counselling skills of peer counsellors that support people living with HIV, including pregnant women, to strengthen the operational capacity of CCS and to maintain adherence to ARV treatment.</p>
<p>There has been very slow implementation of PMTCT due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and an important change of health personnel and managers at different levels. In 2020, the number of prenatal consultations was reduced by more than 20% compared to 2019.</p>	<p>Train human resources at the primary and secondary care level in the use of dual rapid tests for HIV or HIV and Syphilis and promote the inclusion of the use of dual tests in the resolution of decentralised tests to reduce vertical transmission.</p> <p>Strengthen the technical capacities of health providers to integrate HIV services into regular maternal and neonatal services (through trainings, guidance and field visits to monitor implementation).</p> <p>Advocate through political dialogues and ministerial resolutions to improve compliance with the eMTCT protocols and standards.</p>
<p>Challenges that limit the increase in demand for condoms and HIV awareness among young people persist, including limited financial resources to achieve a national expansion of the UEPA strategy, a lack of quality standards required in adolescent health services to increase their demand, and the impact of COVID-19-related confinement for young people seems to affect the demand for condoms.</p>	<p>Continue to strengthen the SRH capacities of health personnel in the selected primary care units; build capacity of technicians from the MSP and SNS in the monitoring and evaluation of UEPA; strengthen the capacities of community leaders to distribute condoms from their homes, thus expanding the coverage.</p> <p>Support the institutionalisation of the UEPA strategy by the local health authority as responsible for the provision of health services.</p>

<p>Lack of capacity among health personnel to use and apply the care guidelines for HIV prevention for key populations in all provinces of the country.</p>	<p>Continue with technical cooperation for the national expansion of PrEP in health services, to better reach key populations.</p> <p>Support the update of the Ministry of Health's drug use disorder care guide to strengthen HIV prevention and care for people who use drugs; and support the proposal to strengthen a public health approach in the care of substance use disorders.</p> <p>Continue to strengthen human resources capacities on care modalities for people who use drugs, both at the governmental and non-governmental level.</p>
<p>It is estimated that sexual violence increased as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, but the lack of PEP kits is hindering the generation of data. There are limited funds to develop activities in favour of reducing gender inequality and GBV.</p>	<p>Support implementation of a study to assess sexual violence among women in the country.</p>

---

Report available on the  
**UNAIDS Results and Transparency Portal**

[open.unaids.org](http://open.unaids.org)