

LAO PEOPLE'S DEMOCRATIC 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
By the end of 2021, 90% of adults and children living with HIV know their status, at least 75% of people living with HIV are on antiretroviral treatment (ART), and 90% of people who are on treatment have viral load suppression.	ON TRACK	By end of 2020, 69% of people living with HIV knew their status, and 54% of all people living with HIV were on treatment (target of 81%) (Spectrum 2021). More than 95% of people living with HIV who were on treatment reached viral load suppression (GAM, 2021).
Adolescent and young people aged 10-24 years in target areas have access to sexual and reproductive health (SRH) services and information.	ON TRACK	At the end of 2020, an estimated 40 000 adolescents and young people had access to SRH and information and services.
By end of 2021, the HIV combination prevention coverage increased by 20% among all key populations including migrants and by 75% for sex workers, 30% among men who have sex with men and transgender people compared to the 2018 baseline.	SLOW PROGRESS	In 2020, coverage of HIV prevention programmes was at 36.8% among sex workers (GAM 2021). An Integrated Biological Behavioural Surveillance Survey (IBBSS) was conducted in 2020, showing that 11.5% of men who have sex with men were tested for HIV in the past 12 months. HIV prevalence among men who have sex with men is on the rise (8% in Vientiane capital city), but stays stable among female sex workers (1%).
Improve the quality and sustainability of the services provided at 28 district drug treatment centres, including substance abuse treatment, harm reduction, and HIV testing and counselling.	ON TRACK	In 2020, 28 district drug treatment centres were providing services (including substance abuse treatment, harm reduction, and HIV testing and counselling) to people who use drugs, with an increasing number of patients (1100 patients and parents benefited from these services in 2020).

By the end of 2021, capacity of national and civil society organization partners strengthened, and domestic funding increased to sustain the HIV response.

ON TRACK

In 2020, around 70 participants from civil society organizations and local government institutes improved their skills on delivery of quality HIV services for hard-to-reach key populations, especially among female sex workers and men who have sex with men. Government expenditure for the national HIV response increased from US\$ 265 102 in 2019 to US\$ 409 261 in 2020.

JOINT TEAM

UNFPA, UNODC, WHO, UNAIDS SECRETARIAT

JOINT PROGRAMME CONTRIBUTIONS AND RESULTS IN 2020

Lao People's Democratic Republic (PDR) is on track to achieve the 90-90-90 targets by 2025 and the Joint Team provided valuable support to increase the number of Point-of-Care sites providing treatment and viral load testing in the country. A lost-to-follow-up guideline has been developed and widely distributed in treatment sites and multi-month dispensary and home delivery of antiretroviral medicines were scaled up to ensure continuity of ART services and improve treatment adherence and health outcome of people living with HIV. The first ever national youth and adolescent development strategy was developed, with support from the Joint Team to include actions to improve access to HIV and sexually transmitted infection information and services. Comprehensive sexuality education was also included in the 9th National Education and Sports Sector Development Plan. Around 500 healthcare workers were trained on adolescent and youth friendly services benefiting thousands of adolescents and young people in the country. A pilot pre-exposure prophylaxis programme targeting high-risk populations was implemented in three hospitals with a plan for scale up in 2021. Comprehensive services for drug users were implemented in all community-based treatment centres and relevant social services were identified for service linkages. In 2020, the Joint Team supported the HIV population size estimation and Biological Behavioural Surveillance Surveys (IBBS) to improve planning, implementation, and evaluation of HIV programmes targeting key and vulnerable populations in Lao PDR.

HIV TESTING AND TREATMENT

UPSTREAM ADVOCACY; TECHNICAL SUPPORT; CAPACITY BUILDING; PARTNERSHIPS

Thanks to support provided by the Joint Team, implementation of the Test and Treat strategy in Lao PDR in 2020 enabled 33% of newly diagnosed people living with HIV to access ART within one day of diagnosis and 71% within seven days.

The Association for People Living with HIV (APL+) was supported to advocate with the Government, development partners, and international and local non-governmental organizations (INGO) to increase ART services for people living with HIV with stable health

conditions. This effort led to the establishment of additional two Point-of-Care (PoC) sites in Oudomxay and Saravan provinces for ARV distribution among people living with HIV with stable physical health, easing the current client load on existing ART sites.

The Joint Team, in collaboration with the Centre of Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the U.S. President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), established a PoC site in Songkon District, Savannakhet Province to promote HIV treatment adherence among people living with HIV. Five health workers in the same district improved their skills on online reporting of HIV case management and data reporting within the District Health Information System 2 (DHIS 2).

In partnership with the University of Health Science and the Centre for HIV/AIDS and STI (CHAS) a consultation workshop was held to review the HIV teaching and learning focus in the pre-service curriculum for health professionals. A follow-up workshop was scheduled for early 2021 to develop a pre-service curriculum that aims to reduce HIV-related stigma and discrimination in health settings and address the lack of human resources working on HIV programmes.

Through support from the Joint Team, the lost to follow up guideline was developed and distributed to track and re-enrol people living with HIV who dropped out of ART services. Multi-month dispensing, and home delivery of ARTs were also initiated to ensure continuity of ART services and adherence to treatment among people living with HIV during the COVID-19 pandemic. Capacity building was provided for a total of 132 healthcare providers and community peer educators from 11 ART sites improving their skill on lost to follow up case management and treatment adherence, quality service delivery, dispensation of antiretroviral drugs, and index testing to increase case finding and reporting. 1200 copies of pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) guidelines, HIV adherence counselling flipcharts, opportunistic infection guidelines, HIV voluntary counselling and testing logbooks, and point- standard operating procedures for PoC and lost-to-follow up services were developed and disseminated to healthcare workers in the 11 ART/PoC sites.

SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH SERVICES FOR ADOLESCENTS AND YOUNG PEOPLE

POLICY DIALOGUE; TECHNICAL SUPPORT; PARTNERSHIPS

Following successful advocacy efforts, the Joint Team supported the Government to develop the first ever national youth and adolescent development strategy. The strategy comprised situation analysis of HIV among young people and proposed recommendations to enhance access to information, HIV prevention, testing, and counselling services, as well as screening and treatment for sexually transmitted infections (STIs) through facility- and community-based programmes. Joint advocacy by the Joint Team also resulted in the inclusion of comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) in the 9th National Education and Sports Sector Development Plan.

Contents from the CSE teachers' guide for secondary education were adapted and integrated into the pre-service teacher training curriculum, and CSE corners were established in Dongkhamxang teacher training college. In partnership with Plan International and Child Fund, 65 teachers from 25 secondary schools in Oudomxay and Xiengkhoung provinces were trained on CSE, and they reached a total of 14 000 secondary students in the two provinces. Additional 25 000 secondary students in 45 schools in Bokeo province received CSE from trained teachers. 1400 students from lower and upper secondary schools were also engaged through interactive CSE videos. As a result of support provided to the Ministry of Education and Sports, 947 (403 female) students from vocational colleges in Bokeo and Savannakhet provinces received CSE training by trained teachers. The colleges also committed to include CSE in their curriculum for the next academic year.

The Nang-Noi Girls Groups programme was initiated in Namore district of Oudomxay province to empower adolescent girls and boys with socio-economic and health knowledge and skills. Support was provided to train 20 trainers and 60 new mentors resulting in delivery of life skills

education to 600 adolescent girls. Furthermore, refresher trainings were conducted for 60 mentors in Bokeo and Savannakhet provinces and the trained mentors delivered life skills education to 600 adolescent girls in 30 villages. A manual for boys' engagement was also developed and finalised in collaboration with programme partners and mapping of adolescents and young people was completed in 30 villages in Namore district of Oudomxay province.

The Lao Women's Union, Lao Youth Union, and Vientiane Youth Centre were supported to run telephone helplines to deliver mental health and psychosocial support to young people and 20 counsellors were trained on delivery of youth-friendly mental health and psychosocial support. Around 2519 young people benefited from the telephone helplines and 3331 people in COVID-19 quarantine centres and communities received counselling through various outreach services. Meanwhile, 1250 staff and students from several vocational and teacher training colleges were supported to attend the promotional event for the Noi Yakhoo Mobile App—the first mobile application in Lao language that provides adolescent and young people access to accurate and high quality SRH information and referral linkages to adolescent helpline.

The Adolescent and Youth Friendly Services (AYFS) training was rolled out four provinces and Vientiane city. In 2020, 146 healthcare workers were trained on implementation of the adolescent and youth friendly services guideline. To date a total of 493 healthcare workers were trained on AYFS and provided youth friendly services to 40 000 adolescents and young people in Lao PDR.

Model AYFS clinics were established and fully equipped in Oudomxay Provincial Hospital and Kaisone District Hospital. In Xay district, 32 peer educators from five schools were trained on SRH and a total of 84 peer educators provided SRH information in school and factories to more than 800 people in the district. Established in 2007 within the Vientiane Youth Center, and receiving financial and technical support from the Joint Team, the SRH hotline received 223 calls per month on HIV, sexually transmitted infection (STI), and family planning.

In 2020, the Joint Team, Agence Universitaire de la Francophonie (AUF), Institut de Recherche pour le Développement (IRD), Pôle Francophone, The Beasts on the Moon Theater Company and Fanglao Dance Group launched an artistic awareness campaign entitled '*My body, My Life, My Future*'. As a result, awareness events under the theme '*Youth Empowerment for Equal and Inclusive Development*' and the '*Live with It*' theater and dance performance engaged over 1000 university students in Vientiane Capital and Luang Prabang provinces raising their awareness on HIV, SRH, the status of adolescent girls, and elimination of stigma and discrimination.

HIV PREVENTION SERVICES FOR KEY POPULATIONS **POLICY ADVICE; TECHNICAL SUPPORT; CAPACITY BUILDING; COMMUNITY** **ENGAGEMENT**

70 participants from civil society organizations (CSOs) and local government institutes improved their skills on the delivery of quality of HIV services for hard-to-reach key populations, especially among female sex workers and men who have sex with men. 160 peer educators were also trained in Luang Prabang and Sayabouly provinces to raise awareness around HIV prevention and treatment services, encourage uptake of HIV testing and counselling (HTC), and build a local network of men who have sex with men.

As a result of technical support and on-site programme monitoring provided to CHAS, PrEP programme was piloted in Mahosot, Mittapab, and Setthatirath hospitals targeting 250 participants. The pilot programmes only reached 103 people (41% of the target population) with PrEP services in 2020 due to service disruptions following the COVID-19 pandemic. The Joint Team also supported CHAS to develop a framework, which will further guide the implementation of PrEP programmes in 2021. Around 2000 posters on PrEP and post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP) services, 300 copies of PrEP manuals (250 in Lao and 50 in English languages), and 5000 copies of a booklet with questions and answers promoting PrEP for HIV prevention among men who have sex with men were printed and disseminated to INGOs, CSOs, and service providers at 11 ART sites.

Representatives of CSOs and government institutes were galvanized to participate in the 2020 World AIDS Day celebrations, with virtual and face-to-face campaigns activities under the theme *Global Solidarity and Shared Responsibility* reaching an estimated 167 000 people across the country.

SERVICES FOR PEOPLE WHO USE DRUGS **TECHNICAL SUPPORT; CAPACITY BUILDING; SYSTEM STRENGTHENING**

The Joint Team conducted an assessment to determine available treatment options, effectiveness of services and existing gaps in all community-based treatment centres for drug use and dependence in Lao PDR. The survey provided an in-depth understanding of challenges drug users face at community hospitals, including regarding the criminalization of drug use, and findings will be used as a baseline to measure progress on the treatment programme. Capacity building was provided for 56 healthcare professionals to ensure the quality of care at these centres comply with international standards. A refresher training was also conducted for medical staff in 28 target community hospitals. A total of 696 patients and 429 parents of young people using amphetamine received counselling through support from the Joint Team.

Comprehensive services, including care, counselling, and follow-up, for people who use/inject drugs were implemented in all community-based treatment centres and relevant social services have been identified for possible linkages. In addition, community awareness activities were conducted, and information, education, and communication (IEC) materials were produced and distributed, to ensure people who use drugs know about services available at the treatment centres.

CAPACITY BUILDING AND RESOURCE MOBILIZATION **POLICY DIALOGUE; TECHNICAL SUPPORT; PARTNERSHIPS**

The Joint Team provided technical support for the development of a ten-year National Strategic Plan (NSP) 2021-2030 and the Prevention and Control of HIV/AIDS and STI Action Plan 2021-2025 to end the AIDS epidemic by 2030. These plans prioritized interventions and locations, based on the highest return on investment, including HIV prevention, testing and treatment programmes targeting populations at high risk, such as men who have sex with men and female sex workers.

CHAS was technically supported to conduct the Integrated Biological Behavioural Surveillance Survey (IBBSS) among female sex workers and men who have sex with men and HIV population size estimation of key populations in Lao PDR. The survey disclosed that HIV prevalence among men who have sex with men was on the rise in all survey sites, with the highest prevalence recorded in Vientiane capital. It also indicated that the HIV prevalence was stable among female sex workers, and that STIs among this group remained high. Findings from the two assessments will inform planning and monitoring of comprehensive HIV and STI programmes targeting key populations.

CONTRIBUTION TO THE COVID-19 RESPONSE

The Joint Team supported community preparedness for provision of HIV services among key populations during the COVID-19 pandemic. In partnership with the APL+, the Community Health Inclusion Association and CHAS, standard operational procedure to scale up the community-based ART delivery model and telehealth services were developed and implemented in 11 ART sites located in eight provinces benefiting 1323 people living with HIV during the pandemic.

Peer educators received training improving their knowledge around COVID-19 prevention and techniques to disseminate prevention information to their peers. The peer educators also received training on delivery of virtual support services and are now providing information on COVID-19 prevention and mental health services using WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger platforms, reaching 100 people living with HIV in 2020.

CONTRIBUTION TO THE INTEGRATED SDG AGENDA

The Joint Team worked together with the United Nations Country Team to review progress and challenges in supporting the national HIV/AIDS response. The Joint Team also participated in the development of the Country Common Assessment (CCA), to guide development of the United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (UNSDCF) 2022-2026, with a particular attention to the HIV/AIDS issues.

PERSISTING AND EMERGING CHALLENGES AND BOTTLENECKS	KEY FUTURE ACTIONS TO RESPOND TO CHALLENGES AND UNBLOCK BOTTLENECKS
<p>The COVID-19 pandemic has caused interruption of HIV prevention, treatment, and care services.</p>	<p>Continue supporting community preparedness to monitor the provision of HIV services for key populations during the COVID-19 pandemic using community guidelines.</p>
<p>Lao PDR is not yet on track to achieve the global target on treatment. The country continues to record high number of AIDS-deaths in the public hospitals. There is only one health facility performing viral testing for the entire country and there is insufficient number of healthcare workers assigned to HIV services sites with high lost-to-follow up cases.</p>	<p>Increase coordination with relevant international and national development partners, civil society, networks of people living with HIV and key populations to achieve the 90-90-90 targets.</p> <p>Provide technical and financial support to strengthen PoC GeneXpert platform to ensure integrated multi-disease molecular testing, including viral load testing.</p>
<p>The absence of a national policy and the lack of capacity in health facilities to provide routine screening for syphilis and cervical cancer are impeding the provision of these services among women living with HIV.</p>	<p>Support CHAS to implement routine screening for cervical cancer, syphilis, and early treatment services for women living with HIV.</p> <p>Conduct advocacy and deliver training to healthcare providers for the implementation of pilot triple elimination (HIV, syphilis, and hepatitis B) service model.</p>
<p>A substantial portion of key populations do not have access to HIV prevention and testing services. Key and target populations lack adequate knowledge and understanding on HIV and PrEP with limited access to HIV and PrEP service facilities. Stigma and discrimination, including self-stigma are prevalent among communities.</p>	<p>Provide technical support to scale up PrEP services putting emphasis on community awareness, demand generation, integration of PrEP into healthcare services, service expansion in high-risk areas, training for healthcare providers and community peer educators on implementation of PrEP services, and development of a reporting and monitoring system.</p>
<p>Adolescents and young people do not have adequate access to adolescent- and youth-friendly sexual and reproductive health information and services, which increases the risks of STIs, HIV/AIDS and other adverse health outcomes.</p> <p>There is a lack of resources to scale up CSE across the country and set up monitoring mechanisms to assess progress on CSE initiatives. CSE intervention for out-of-school youth is limited.</p>	<p>Provide technical support to expand adolescent and youth friendly services in selected districts in 2 provinces including capacity building of healthcare providers in district hospitals.</p> <p>Support the Government to establish model clinic for adolescents and youth friendly health services in 2 provinces and implementation of mobile outreach activities to provide SRH information and services to adolescents and young people.</p> <p>Continue support to integrate CSE into national primary school curriculum and strengthen the capacity of implementing partners at central and local level.</p> <p>Support resource mobilization to scale up CSE in secondary and vocational training schools nationwide.</p> <p>Support the Nang-Noi Girls Group programme for expansion in Oudomxay province.</p>

<p>Declining international and domestic resources threaten the scale up and sustainability of the national HIV response.</p>	<p>Intensify advocacy for increased investment in prevention by mainstreaming HIV prevention into the health system and social economic development projects.</p>
<p>Low knowledge and lack of capacity of medical professionals around drug treatment, affecting provision of services. Public awareness on drug use is limited, and people who use drugs fear accessing treatment services due to stigma and discrimination.</p>	<p>Continue building capacity of medical professionals to ensure the quality of care at community-based treatment centres meets international standard.</p> <p>Develop community awareness activities to ensure people who use drugs know that care services are available and encourage them to seek treatment and counselling.</p>

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