

LIBERIA

Report prepared by the Joint UN Team on AIDS

JOINT TEAM

UNHCR, UNICEF, WFP, UNDP, UNFPA, UN WOMEN, ILO, UNESCO, WHO, UNAIDS SECRETARIAT, FAO

JOINT PROGRAMME CONTRIBUTIONS AND RESULTS IN 2020-2021

To improve access and ensure the continuity of HIV services during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Government of Liberia was supported by the Joint Team to implement HIV self-testing; multimonth dispensing of antiretroviral treatment using pharmacies, community-based delivery, and medicine pickup points; and donation of food baskets and COVID-19 prevention commodities. The Joint Team also facilitated training of healthcare providers; procurement of HIV testing kits, equipment, and reagents and mobilization of communities to improve prevention of mother-to-child transmission of HIV, early infant diagnosis, and viral load monitoring services. Teachers, representatives of community-based organizations were trained on the delivery of comprehensive sexuality education to increase HIV and sexual and reproductive health knowledge among adolescents and young people. Traditional, community and religious leaders, youth groups, and male networks were mobilized to address stigma, discrimination, and sexual and gender-based violence, and improve access to medical, psychosocial, and legal services. Women, including women living with HIV, were empowered to create income generating activities and start small enterprises to make livelihood for their families and lead a healthy and productive life. The Joint Team further supported the Government to mobilize resources, gather new evidence, and reform the National AIDS Commission to ensure the effectiveness and sustainability of the HIV response in Liberia.

PMTCT, HIV TESTING AND TREATMENT

In 2020-2021, the Joint Team strengthened its support in accelerating progress towards the elimination of mother-to-child transmission of HIV services in Liberia. HIV testing and counselling services were offered to pregnant women enrolled on antenatal care and GeneXpert cartridges were procured for early infant diagnosis and viral load testing. As a result, 540 children and 11 000 adults living with HIV accessed viral load testing services. Index and family testing programmes were also launched in three counties reaching 460 households. A total of 906 children (including 479 females) from these households received HIV testing, of whom 14 children tested HIV positive and were linked to treatment services. Additionally, HIV/Syphilis dual tests were scaled up in three counties to improve screening for syphilis and initiate immediate treatment to prevent adverse outcomes in pregnancy and transmission to foetus. In 2021, around 75 000 pregnant women had been screened during the first antenatal care visit.

To ensure the continuity of HIV treatment services during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Joint Team supported the Government in implementing a six-month multimonth dispensing (MMD) of antiretroviral treatment for eligible people living with HIV. MMD was provided through qualified pharmacies, community-based delivery, and medicine pickup points facilitated by community support groups. A total of 11 992 people living with HIV accessed their treatment through MMD in 2020-2021, including 3-5 months MMD for 9874 people and MMD \geq 6 months for 2118 people.

The Joint Team provided 150 bags of rice, 288 pieces of hand sanitizers, 200 gallons of chloride, and 100 hand washing equipment to four networks of people living with HIV in Montserrado County to prevent COVID-19 infection and alleviate the economic impacts of the pandemic.

HIV PREVENTION AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE

In line with the National HIV Strategic Plan 2021-2025, the Joint Team facilitated access to HIV and sexual and reproductive health services, and comprehensive sexuality education for 250 000 young people. More than 210 000 of the young people also accessed integrated youth friendly sexual and reproductive health services from health facilities and outreach sites that are supported by the Joint Team.

Technical assistance was given to the Government for the development of the National Youth Policy and Action Plan and the preparation of comprehensive sexuality education facilitator manuals. Additionally, the Joint Team conducted training for 966 teachers from 331 schools nationwide to improve their skills for the delivery of comprehensive sexuality education benefiting 10 118 young learners (including 6854 females) in schools.

The Joint Team provided training for representatives of 12 community-based organizations to improve their capacity of delivering mentorship and comprehensive sexuality education for out-of-school adolescents and young people. The organizations reached close to 30 000 out-of-school adolescents and young people. Additional 2000 adolescent girls and young women received behavioural change education.

The Federation of Liberian Youth (FLY)—a national umbrella organization of youth and student organizations— was supported to implement various activities, including a youth roundtable on HIV, stigma, and discrimination drawing close to 200 participants, and HIV testing, and condom promotion and distribution initiatives. FLY also received technical and financial assistance to develop and broadcast HIV prevention messages on 15 local community radios across the country and in organizing a debating competition on HIV among college students, which was aired on four national radio stations reaching an estimated 100 000 young people across the country.

GENDER INEQUALITY, GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE, STIGMA, AND DISCRIMINATION

As part of the Global Partnership against HIV related stigma and discrimination, the Network of people living with HIV was supported to carryout community sensitization on HIV-related stigma and discrimination and sexual and gender-based violence resulting in 100 community, traditional, and religious leaders from 36 communities changing their perception of people living with HIV and their association with sexual and gender-based violence. These leaders are increasingly engaging in the implementation of the sexual and gender-based violence referral pathways to ensure people living with HIV who survived violence can access medical care, psychosocial and legal support, and safe shelters.

The Joint Team supported 18 women-led tailoring businesses to produce 14 500 face masks during the COVID-19 pandemic. The masks were distributed to 1958 community members and 1412 market women during awareness-raising events. Additionally, more than 575 women beneficiaries received funding from the Joint Team to revive their respective Savings and Loan

Associations impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. This support is not only helping women and their families to save money, access loans, and improve their livelihoods during the pandemic but also empowering them to make decisions within their homes and communities.

In partnership with several women's groups, including the Liberian Women Empowerment Network, Women of Liberia Mass Action, and Association of Women in Cross Border Trade, the Joint Team provided a comprehensive and sequenced capacity building package, including literacy, numeracy, and business skills aimed at ensuring economic empowerment among women in Liberia. A total of 325 adolescent girls and women living with HIV were reached to improve their knowledge and skills of entrepreneurship while 26 women beneficiaries were trained to serve as business coaches and mentors. Technical and financial support was also provided to establish 13 Savings and Loan Associations—self-sustaining and self-managed saving groups—to offer sustainable savings and loan services. Monitoring missions highlighted that food insecurity among members of the associations declined from 75% to 20% after one year of saving.

In partnership with national and international partners, the Joint Team persistently advocated for the reduction of stigma and discrimination in Liberia. This culminated in Liberia joining the Global Partnership to Eliminate All Forms of HIV-Related Stigma and Discrimination. Technical assistance was also provided for the development of the Zero Discrimination Action Plan (October 2021–December 2022) under the theme *Accelerating Commitments to End HIV-Related Stigma and Discrimination*.

INVESTMENT AND EFFICIENCY

The Joint Team provided technical assistance and ensured active engagement of civil society for the development of the COVID-19 funding request mobilizing US\$ 15 542 350 from the Global Fund COVID-19 Response Mechanism for the COVID-19 response in Liberia.

Technical assistance and advisory were provided to the Government for the reform of the National AIDS Commission. The reform included redefining the commission's mandate to improve focus on leadership, coordination, and planning of the national HIV response; and streamlining the organizational structure.

The Joint Team supported the National AIDS Control Programme in updating the HIV estimates on the Spectrum file which will be used to guide HIV programming and policy reform in the country.

CONTRIBUTION TO THE INTEGRATED SDG AGENDA

The Joint Team made significant contribution to reinforce Liberia's progress toward the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Food support and capacity building for income generating activities were provided for vulnerable people living with HIV, including women to overcome the impact of COVID-19—in line with SDGs 1 and 5.

Financial and technical assistance was provided to improve access to quality HIV prevention, testing, and treatment programmes and integration in other healthcare services. Community-based HIV services were supported to scale up treatment for people living with HIV during the COVID-19 pandemic, a direct contribution to SDG 3.

The Joint Team formed partnerships with community-based organization, trained educators, and provided technical and financial support to scale up comprehensive sexuality education among in- and out-of-school young people. Literacy, numeracy, and entrepreneurship trainings were offered to women and adolescent girls to improve their livelihood and empower them to make decisions, contributing towards SDGs 1 and 4.

Under SDG 5, the Joint Team sought to address gender inequality and amplify the voices of women living with HIV by investing in strategies that transform social norms and harmful traditional practices.

CHALLENGES AND LESSONS LEARNED

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Government of Liberia declared a state of emergency with a national lockdown that significantly impacted the delivery of HIV and other essential services. Bad road conditions during rainy season also impeded people from accessing HIV services.

While international partners continued to support condom procurement in Liberia, a clear national strategy and projection is required to ensure target groups are reached with coordinated and consistent approach. Additionally, the supply chain management system remains weak and a major concern for the HIV response, causing stockouts and service interruptions.

Inadequate national capacity deterred the scale up of HIV prevention programmes in the country. Although community-based organization, especially networks of key populations and women groups have high commitment, there is a need to build their organizational, technical, and financial capacities to improve access to community-led HIV prevention programmes. Lessons learned showed that creating demand for HIV services requires vigorous mobilization and engagement of communities, based on sound strategies and participation of key stakeholders.

Critical lessons learned from the HIV response in Liberia underscored that motivational package for volunteers and people living with HIV support groups accelerates programme implementation especially in rural communities and provide opportunity for further engagement for ownership and accountability.

Robust sexual and gender-based violence outreach incorporated within sexual and reproductive health and rights programming also has the potential to increase case reporting and support for survivors, contributing to the elimination of violence against women and girls. The programme has since integrated sexual and gender-based violence messaging and continued to promote improved awareness of referral pathways for clinical services, reporting mechanisms, and the shared responsibility of men and women to promote sexual and reproductive health and rights among target populations and communities.

The successful engagement of men as gender advocates and in sexual and reproductive health and rights further assists in achieving transformative changes against stereotypes that perpetuate discrimination and inequality in targeted communities. Working with men and boys has included strategic dialogues and consultations during community entry, the HeForShe Campaign awareness raising in communities, use of local male facilitators to support the facilitation of training at the community level.

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