

REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA

Report prepared by the Joint UN Team on AIDS

JOINT TEAM

UNICEF, UNDP, UNFPA, UNODC, UN WOMEN, WHO, UNAIDS SECRETARIAT, OHCHR

JOINT PROGRAMME CONTRIBUTIONS AND RESULTS IN 2020-2021

To improve the quality of HIV testing and treatment services, the Joint Team continued to support the Government's drive for decentralization of treatment services through the establishment of additional treatment centres, and piloting of a decentralized service delivery model in selected municipalities. An HIV and Tuberculosis Crisis Management Team was established and various service delivery mechanisms, such as community-led home delivery of antiretroviral treatment were implemented to ensure the continuity of services during the COVID-19 pandemic. Personal protective equipment and food support were also distributed to help vulnerable people living with HIV access HIV services and overcome the impacts of the pandemic. Healthcare providers were trained on outpatient service delivery and management of COVID-19 to improve the quality and continuity of HIV, antenatal, and nutrition services among pregnant and breastfeeding women. A package of education materials was developed, and teachers were trained to strengthen the quality life-skills education for vocational and education training students. Financial and technical support provided by the Joint Team also went into establishing a network of young peer educators and youth-friendly learning spaces in schools to boost access to information HIV prevention and sexual and reproductive health. Pre-exposure prophylaxis services were scaled up and thousands of healthcare providers and staff members of nongovernmental organizations were trained to improve HIV prevention programmes for key populations, including young people from key population groups. Capacity of various stakeholders on human rights, gender equality, and gender-based violence was built while nongovernmental organizations received grants to strengthen their capacity for advocacy for the protection of human rights among women, and quality and gender sensitive essential services, including HIV.

HIV TESTING AND TREATMENT

To strengthen the laboratory quality management system in Moldova, the Joint Team supported an assessment on the implementation of the national HIV testing algorithm and the rapid plasma reaging (RPR) test for syphilis in primary health centres and hospitals, and their alignment with the World Health Organization's recommendations. The assessment concluded that the use of the new testing algorithm ensured the decrease in the HIV confirmation delay from almost 60 days to 1-2 days. About 84% of health institutions implemented this new testing mechanism. Some challenges and bottlenecks were identified, including the lack of standard operating procedures in 60% of the assessed facilities. The Joint Team will support

implementation of corrective actions, such as continuous supervision of laboratory facilities, the development of standard operating procedures and their institutionalization in all health facilities, and the training of laboratory personnel. Technical support was provided for the development of early warning indicators for monitoring of antiretroviral drug resistance and their inclusion in the Moldovan Draft National Programme on Prevention and Control of HIV/AIDS and STIs 2021-2025.

In 2021, the Joint Team provided technical support for the development of a decentralized service delivery model aimed at improving access to HIV testing, treatment, and care services. The model, which was approved by the Ministry of Health, was successfully piloted in Căușeni town and Ungheni municipality, increasing the total number of ART centres to 10 in the country. Best practices and challenges from the pilot will be shared with district stakeholders to expand decentralized HIV services to 12 more centres by the end of 2023.

The Joint Team conducted three comprehensive studies on the abandonment of ART among people living with HIV enrolled on treatment, the addressability to lost-to-follow up cases, and no ART initiation cases. Preliminary findings showed lower addressability and higher treatment drop-out rates during the COVID-19 pandemic, which added to the similar findings in many essential health services in Moldova.

The Government received technical assistance from the Joint Team to ensure continuity of HIV and tuberculosis services during the COVID-19 pandemic through the establishment of an HIV and Tuberculosis Crisis Management Team, composed of personnel from National tuberculosis and HIV Programmes, public medical institutions, development partners and non-governmental and community-based organizations. The Team conducted a risk assessment of HIV and tuberculosis services continuity and developed various mitigating mechanisms, including community-led home delivery of ART and pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) in remote areas of Moldova.

Technical and financial assistance went to training 30 outreach workers and managers from nongovernmental organizations on safe delivery of ART for people living with HIV and procurement of personal protective equipment worth US\$ 10 000 for 100 outreach workers. As a result, close to 900 people living with HIV were able to access treatment through home delivery of ART during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown period. Additionally, 125 Moldovan migrants living with HIV were supported to access ART in their respective host countries.

The Joint Team provided COVID-19 protection and hygiene materials and food supplies for 3767 women living with HIV and female sex workers across the country to protect themselves from COVID-19 infection and overcome the economic impacts of the pandemic.

ELIMINATION OF MOTHER-TO-CHILD TRANSMISSION OF HIV

The Joint Team supported the Government to develop and establish an internal quality assurance system for the prevention of mother-to-child transmission of HIV (PMTCT) services in Moldova, which requires the in-depth analysis of each case of mother to child transmission, its discussion at the Committee or Specialised College of Ministry of Health, and the taking of system-related corrective actions. The Joint Team also facilitated the conduction of supportive supervision visits in all hospitals, including laboratories, antenatal care and specialized outpatient care involved in providing services to women and newborns living with HIV. Findings and recommendations were shared with the Ministry of Health and medical institutions involved to further improve the provision of care among pregnant women living with HIV.

In 2020, the Joint Team trained 180 primary healthcare providers on the delivery of outpatient HIV services, HIV testing and counselling, nutrition for pregnant women, and breastfeeding support aimed at addressing the disruption of HIV services, including HIV testing among pregnant women during the COVID pandemic. Additionally, training on prevention and clinical management of COVID-19 was conducted for more than 80 antenatal healthcare staff to curb infection and manage cases among pregnant women.

Technical and financial assistance was provided to the Ministry of Health for conduction of the virtual LIVE Information Workshop broadcasted on Facebook to sensitize women on accessing antenatal and postnatal care services during the COVID-19 pandemic—the workshop recorded about 15 000 views.

HIV PREVENTION AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE

The Ministry of Education, Culture and Research was supported in aligning the mandatory and optional curricula on health education, including comprehensive sexuality education targeting general education and vocational education and training (VET) with international standards.

The Joint Team provided technical assistance in developing a package of education materials for the delivery of quality life-skills education for VET students. Moreover, the Joint Team conducted training for 24 VET teachers to improve their skills for delivering quality life-skills education; and held informative sessions on healthy development of adolescents, safe behaviours, and gender-based violence reaching 364 VET staff across the country. Financial and technical support was also provided to establish a network of VET youth peer educators on life skills; and to set up youth-friendly learning spaces in 13 classrooms, including with the procurement of learning materials, furniture, and information technology.

To raise awareness and improve access to sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) information and services among adolescents and young people, the Joint Team supported the Ministry of Education, Culture and Research to develop a board game and a quiz on SRHR, to be used by the Network of Youth Clinics and Youth Centres as part of comprehensive sexuality education initiatives. Similarly, a Joint Team-supported online peer-to-peer campaign led by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Research reached 34 702 adolescent and young people. Furthermore, an additional 98 107 adolescent and young people aged 13-24 years were reached through a virtual psychological support programme entitled *My Choice is to be OK*.

HIV PREVENTION AMONG KEY POPULATIONS

Intensive technical and financial support by the Joint Team, development partners, and the Global Fund led to a three-fold increase in PrEP coverage—a total of 275 people accessed PrEP services in 2021 compared to 89 in 2019. The Joint Team conducted training for 1093 healthcare providers from urban and rural health facilities and 81 staff members of nongovernmental organizations working with key populations to improve their skills on the latest standards in organizing and implementing HIV prevention programmes for key populations, including young people from key population groups. In addition, 142 representatives of civil society organizations, including from the Transnistria region working with people from key populations were trained on the delivery of tailored HIV prevention services.

The Joint Team made significant contributions to the development of contingency plans and standard operating procedures for the prevention of COVID-19 in prisons, which were approved by prisons administrations in Moldova (right bank), including in Transnistrian region (left bank, frozen conflict zone). Additionally, 2000 protective gowns and COVID-19 prevention and management training were delivered to 200 healthcare providers in prisons to ensure treatment and care for prisoners with COVID-19 infection.

The Joint Team provided technical assistance for the revision of the modus operandi for essential HIV prevention and opioid agonist therapy (OAT) services, which allowed clients to take their treatments home. Coordination and communication support was also provided to avoid stockout of methadone supplies during the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result of technical support provided by the Joint Team, 145 people who use new psychoactive substances (NPS) and stimulants and practice Chemsex were reached with HIV and sexually transmitted infections (STIs) services through social media and dating apps. These services revealed that 3.9% of them tested HIV positive, 3.2% were diagnosed with various STIs, and 15% tested positive for hepatitis C.

GENDER INEQUALITY AND GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

Technical and financial assistance was provided for the development of an online training course on gender equality and HIV aimed at improving the capacity of professionals, activists, and beneficiaries to implement gender sensitive and transformative HIV programmes. One hundred thirty-one duty bearers and right holders in the field of HIV were trained using the online course. A three-day training of trainers workshop on this online course was also organized for 25 teachers from higher education institutions.

The Joint Team implemented a mentoring programme reaching around 100 women living with HIV to improve their knowledge on signs of gender-based violence and discrimination, and available services to mitigate; as well as to strengthen their skills on the identification of abusive behaviours and other challenging relationships, self-knowledge, and COVID-19 prevention measures.

Small grants were provided to four nongovernmental organizations working on HIV, including from the Transnistrian region, to strengthen their capacity for advocacy at local and national levels for the protection of human rights among women and for the delivery of quality and gender sensitive essential services, including HIV.

HUMAN RIGHTS, STIGMA, AND DISCRIMINATION

The Joint Team mobilized US\$ 203 000 from the Swedish Government to support the implementation of the 2020-2021 One UN joint project on human rights aimed at eliminating all forms HIV-related stigma and discrimination in Moldova. For instance, concerted advocacy and technical assistance by the Joint Team, civil society organizations, networks of people living with HIV, and activists led to the review of a law in Moldova that prevented people living with HIV from adopting children or becoming guardians or foster parents or access vitro fertilization services. A HIV related public policy review enabled people living with HIV in the Transnistrian region to exercise their rights to decent jobs without mandatory HIV testing. Furthermore, specific discriminatory terms for key population groups have also been removed from the public policy and people from these groups are now able to donate blood.

Also through the One UN joint project, the community-based PrEP model was developed and about 275 people were accessing PrEP by mid-2022 in Moldova, including in the Transnistrian region. In addition, in collaboration with the University of Medicine and Pharmacy and the National Excellency College of Medicine, a comprehensive curricula revision was performed using the human rights lens, in an effort to address stigma and discrimination in health institutions. As a result, 90 academia professors were trained on human rights and assertive interpersonal communication.

INVESTMENT AND EFFICIENCY

In commemoration of the 2020 World AIDS Day, the Joint Team organized a high-level dialogue at the Parliament of Moldova on the sustainability of the national HIV response. At this occasion, the parliamentarians pledged to help safeguard the human rights of people living with or affected by HIV and to ensure a gender responsive and people-centred national HIV response.

The Joint Team provided technical support for the development of a successful Global Fund concept note mobilizing Euro 18 061 192 for the 2021-2023 grant period to support the national HIV, tuberculosis, and malaria responses in Moldova. Additionally, Euro 1 295 572 was raised from the Global Fund COVID-19 Response Mechanism to ensure the continuity of HIV and tuberculosis services during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Municipal Council of Chisinau was supported to develop the first Chisinau Municipal HIV Programme 2021-2025 with around US\$ 25 000 budget allocated for HIV prevention, treatment, and care programmes targeting key populations.

CONTRIBUTION TO THE INTEGRATED SDG AGENDA

The Joint Team was actively involved in ensuring that Moldova's national HIV response was aligned and contributes to the achievement of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) on good health and well-being, reduced inequalities, strong institutions, partnerships, and the “leave no one behind” principle. This principle commits all UN Member States to eradicating poverty in all its forms, ending discrimination and exclusion, and reducing the inequalities and vulnerabilities that leave people behind and undermine the potential of individuals and communities.

The Joint Team actively contributes to the implementation of the United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (UNSDCF) 2018-2022, particularly to the Strategic Priority 4 “Inclusive and equitable social development”, where the work on health, HIV, gender, and social protection is included.

CHALLENGES AND LESSONS LEARNED

The COVID-19 pandemic and related restriction measures presented multiple challenges in Moldova, such as the disruption of HIV services; implementation of planned support activities; and data collection, including information gathering for the pandemic impact assessment among people living with HIV. Government prioritization of financial and human resources for the COVID-19 response further strained HIV service delivery in the country. The Joint Team's experience showed that mixed approaches, such as strengthened routine statistics, community-led monitoring and open data or e-health monitoring and evaluation, serve as effective means of data collection during pandemics. Digital consultations and decentralised HIV service delivery were also key to reaching vulnerable and key populations in the lockdown period.

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