

NEPAL

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
90% of people living with HIV are diagnosed and 80% of these are on antiretroviral treatment (ART).	ON TRACK	83% people living with HIV in Nepal knew their HIV status, of whom 79% were on treatment, and 91% achieved viral load suppressed by 2020 (GAM 2021).
Increased access to prevention of mother-to-child transmission of HIV (PMTCT) services and keep mothers alive throughout Nepal.	NO PROGRESS	Nationwide coverage of PMTCT declined from 58% in 2018 to 40% in 2020: only 86 out of the 216 pregnant women living with HIV accessed PMTCT services (GAM, 2021).
Addressing obstacles to critical programme and social enablers.	ON TRACK	Nepal secured USD 1.1 million from the Global Fund for the 2021-2024 period to address human rights and gender-related barriers to accessing HIV related services. Interventions will be implemented in 57 districts of Nepal in collaboration with civil society organisations, including advocacy with national authorities, capacity building of HIV service providers and legal professionals, sensitisation of law enforcement and criminal justice personnel, and improved access to legal information for key populations and people affected by HIV and tuberculosis.
Review, develop, and implement the National HIV Strategic Plan (2021-2026).	ON TRACK	The 2020 epidemiology analysis in Nepal and review of the National HIV Strategic Plan (NHSP) 2016-2021 were completed and the results supported the Global Fund 2021-2024 grant and PEPFAR COP2020 funding proposals, and the development of the new NHSP 2021-2026.

JOINT TEAM

UNHCR, UNICEF, WFP, UNDP, UNFPA, UNODC, UN WOMEN, ILO, UNESCO, WHO, UNAIDS SECRETARIAT, IOM, UNRCO

JOINT PROGRAMME CONTRIBUTIONS AND RESULTS IN 2020

Nepal continued to make significant progress towards the 90-90-90 targets following the adoption of the Test and Treat strategy in 2017 and the scale up of community-led HIV testing programmes. Strong technical and financial support was provided by the Joint UN Team on AIDS to the Government in its effort to transition people living with HIV to Dolutegravir-based regimen; and, as a result, gains have been made in putting more people living with HIV on treatment. Engagement with young people, teachers, and peer educators reinforced access to and uptake of sexual and reproductive health and HIV prevention information, support, and services. Socio-economic and health vulnerabilities associated with the dual HIV and COVID-19 pandemics were addressed through community engagement and various support programmes, including nutrition assistance and mental health services.

HIV TESTING AND TREATMENT**ADVOCACY; TECHNICAL SUPPORT; FOSTERING PARTNERSHIPS**

The Joint Team played a pivotal role in enhancing the national HIV Testing and Treatment Guidelines 2020, which recommended improved criteria for HIV testing among adults and pregnant women, early infant diagnosis (EID), rapid initiation of ART, multimonth dispensing for antiretroviral drugs, differentiated service delivery, and management of critical HIV cases with very low CD4 count or major opportunistic infections. The rapid initiation of ART resulted in increased number of people living with HIV enrolled on treatment—from 18 628 in 2019 to 19 827 in 2020. Viral load testing services were implemented in additional five provinces making the service available in eight provinces in the country. However, only 10 657 people living with HIV were tested for viral load suppression due to challenges in sample transportation to the testing sites.

As a result of the successful advocacy led by the Joint Team, Dolutegravir (DTG) has been adopted as the preferred first-line regimen in Nepal. Technical support was also provided for the forecasting of DTG demand, procurement, and distribution to all ART sites to assist the transition process. More than 100 healthcare providers working in ART sites in all seven provinces also received orientation materials on initiation and management of DTG, which were developed with support from the Joint Team.

To further reach the 90-90-90 testing and treatment targets, technical and financial assistance was provided to produce public service announcements (PSAs) on HIV testing and treatment which were aired on seven local FM radio stations for 60 days prior to the World AIDS Day 2020 in all seven provinces.

PMTCT COVERAGE**POLICY DIALOGUE; TECHNICAL SUPPORT; PARTNERSHIPS**

In 2020, the Joint Team supported the National AIDS Programme to review the national PMTCT programme, identifying current limitations and addressing the decline in service coverage. Support was also provided to develop new HIV Testing and Treatment Guidelines aimed at increasing uptake of HIV testing and counselling (HTC) services among adults, pregnant

women, and infants. Support was also provided to improve HTC coverage among pregnant women attending antenatal care, contributing to the 7.8% increase recorded care between 2019 and 2020. However, the ART coverage among antenatal care attendees did not show significant progress within the same period.

The Joint Team supported the expansion of child and adolescent mental health services, including for those living with HIV. In addition, the Joint Team continued its support to monitor HIV testing in antenatal care services, and 75 laboratory personnel and paramedical staff were trained on early infant diagnosis sample collection.

HIV PREVENTION AND SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH POLICY DIALOGUE; TECHNICAL SUPPORT; PARTNERSHIPS

The Joint Team provided technical and financial support to the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology to improve Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) for adolescent and young people in Nepal. The national curriculum for grades 4-12 incorporating key elements of CSE was revised, and the operational guidelines for the Adolescent-Friendly Information Corner (AFIC) were finalized to increase access to age-appropriate information and knowledge about life skills and healthy choices for adolescents in school setting. A total of 297 government officials including teachers and policy makers from 10 districts were also trained on implementation of the AFIC guidelines.

The Joint Team conducted a five-day training for 379 teachers from 118 schools in 10 districts improving their capacity on delivery of CSE in schools. Another 12 teachers received a five-day on-site mentoring and coaching to ensure they have adequate support, resource materials, and confidence to effectively apply their knowledge when delivering CSE in the classroom. The on-site mentoring and coaching initiative was piloted in three schools in 2020 with planned implementation in 12 more schools in 2021.

CSE peer educators were assisted to reach around 1500 students and local stakeholders including community gatekeepers, parents, community leaders, and youth clubs to raise awareness on the basic concepts of CSE, including gender and social norms, and sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), menstrual health, and hygiene. In addition, innovative community outreach initiatives and digital platforms were utilized by the Joint Team to ensure access to CSE among adolescent and young people during COVID-19 pandemic-related school closures.

To improve access and consistent use of condoms as prevention of HIV and other sexually transmitted infections, and early and unintended pregnancy, the Joint Team procured 11 695 968 male condoms to be distributed to communities in government health centres free of charge.

ADDRESSING OBSTACLES TO THE HIV RESPONSE POLICY ADVICE; TECHNICAL SUPPORT; COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

As a result of technical support provided to the Country Coordinating Mechanism (CCM), the Global Fund grant proposal for 2021-2024 succeeded in securing US\$ 48 582 702 for the national HIV response. This grant included US\$ 1.1 million of catalytic funding to address human rights and gender-related barriers to accessing services, such as scale up of stigma and discrimination reduction programmes in communities and health sectors. Sensitization of law enforcement and criminal justice personnel, legal capacity building on HIV-related human rights violations and gender-based violence (GBV) targeting key populations and people living with HIV or affected by tuberculosis, and advocacy efforts to galvanise government commitment for supportive laws and policies have also been prioritised in the catalytic funding proposal. Support was also provided for the development of the PEPFAR Country Operation Plan 2020-2021 (COP 2021) which mobilized US\$ 10.4 million for various HIV programmes with special focus on improving uptake of HIV testing and treatment outcomes among key populations and populations at high risk, including people living with HIV, female sex workers, men who have sex with men, and transgender people.

To enhance active community engagement in the HIV response, the Joint Team supported the transgender network in its negotiation with the Government securing US\$ 12 million from the Global Fund 2021-2024 grant to scale up integrated HIV programmes targeting men who have sex with men, transgender persons, female sex workers, migrants, and prisoners.

In commemoration of the World AIDS Day 2020, short visual PSAs on the importance of community engagement in the national HIV response were developed and disseminated globally via the UNAIDS website and social media pages. The PSAs featured Gopal Shrestha, the first person living with HIV to ascend Mount Everest and other leaders from vulnerable and key population networks, including sex workers, transgender persons, people who inject or use drugs, and people living with HIV.

In 2020, the Joint Team provided technical support to complete the first National Integrated Behavioural and Biological Survey (IBBS) among people who inject drugs in Nepal. Results highlighted an inconsistent condom use, a low knowledge of HIV transmission modes, and high levels of needles sharing. Also, 9.8% of participants avoided seeking healthcare because of stigma and discrimination. IBBS findings will guide development and implementation of outreach programmes towards people who inject drugs.

CONTRIBUTION TO THE COVID-19 RESPONSE

In 2020, the Joint Team and USAID supported the supply chain and procured antiretroviral drugs to prevent nationwide stock out of HIV and tuberculosis medicines and commodities during the COVID-19 pandemic. The network of people living with HIV (NAP+N) and the National Federation of Women Living with HIV (NFWLHA) were also supported to expand access to ART among people living with HIV and ensure their adherence to treatment during the lockdown period. The Joint Team successfully advocated for broader involvement of community home-based care workers and volunteers to facilitate home delivery of ARTs for people living with HIV unable to visit the treatment centres during the pandemic.

Technical assistance was provided to the National AIDS Programme to develop and implement interim guidelines to maintain HIV services during the COVID-19 pandemic. In partnership with NAP+N, the provision of 'take-home doses' for opioid substitution therapy (OST) programme was implemented to reduce illicit opiate use which increases HIV risk behaviours and other harmful activities.

A total of 17 virtual sessions on mental and psychological health and human rights laws reached 500 young key populations, including sex workers, men who have sex with men, and transgender persons improving their understanding around stress management, mental health, career and relationships, COVID-19 and HIV prevention, HIV treatment and side effects, and relationship between COVID-19 and HIV. Over 40 000 children, adolescents, parents, and teachers also received mental health support during the pandemic—through face-to-face sessions and online means.

The Joint Team collaborated with networks of people living with HIV and key populations to minimize COVID-19 driven vulnerability of people living with HIV and high-risk populations. In collaboration with seven local civil society organizations, 610 female sex workers were provided with essential food and hygiene kits, including sanitary pads satisfying their immediate basic needs during the pandemic. Another 45 women living with HIV in 21 municipalities of four provinces received the comprehensive relief package, which includes cash and in-kind support. As a result of support provide to NFWLHA, 200 women and their families affected by COVID-19 restrictions received nutrition and hygiene supplies.

CONTRIBUTION TO THE INTEGRATED SDG AGENDA

Under the UN-led Global Programme to End Child Marriage, the Joint Team continued the roll out of the Rupantaran Social and Financial Skills Package to empower adolescent girls to engage in various livelihood option and make informed SRH decisions. The Rupantaran Social and Financial Skills Package is a 52-weeks course covering HIV, SRH, nutrition, human rights, gender equality, civic responsibilities, and basic accounting. Usually delivered by peer facilitators, the modules were adapted into a radio programme to safely reach the target audiences during the pandemic. A total of 31 episodes of Rupantaran Package radio programme were aired on multiple radio station in 19 districts reaching an estimated 30 000 adolescent girls in five priority districts during the lockdown.

PERSISTING AND EMERGING CHALLENGES AND BOTTLENECKS	KEY FUTURE ACTIONS TO RESPOND TO CHALLENGES AND UNBLOCK BOTTLENECKS
<p>Progress on the implementation of CSE and Rupantaran Social and Financial Skills Package was affected by school closures across Nepal due to the COVID-19 pandemic.</p>	<p>Develop indicators for the monitoring and evaluation of CSE and explore ways to integrate these indicators in formal and non-formal system within the new School Sector Development Plan.</p>
<p>Despite Government commitment and increased investment in test and treat strategies, adoption of differentiated and innovating HIV testing services is slow.</p>	<p>Intensify advocacy for scale up of self-testing, index testing, community-led testing and referrals and other HIV prevention methods, including PrEP to reach the fast-track target on HIV testing.</p> <p>Continue technical and financial support to expand viral load testing services, including adherence and retention to maintain viral load suppression among people living with HIV.</p>
<p>The national procurement and supply management (PSM) system and policies must be strengthened to eliminate misalignment of demand and supply and support the HIV and tuberculosis responses.</p>	<p>Continue technical assistance to the Government to improve the PSM system, including exploring the possibility of implementing pooled procurement mechanism and decentralised decision-making and forecasting systems.</p>
<p>Access to antenatal and postnatal care among pregnant and lactating women remain inadequate, predominantly due to low institutional delivery and the lack of skilled health professional attending childbirth.</p>	<p>Provide technical support in the review of the national PMTCT programme to increase uptake of services and ultimately reduce the vertical HIV transmission rate to achieve the elimination targets.</p> <p>Continue coordination with the Family Health Division to expand PMTCT services across the country.</p> <p>Support implementation of the new National HIV Strategic Plan 2021-2026 and the Global Fund grant, which prioritise to address the low PMTCT services coverage.</p>
<p>HIV prevention programmes targeting migrants and other key populations, including OST services, must be scaled up to achieve national and global HIV prevention targets.</p>	<p>Assist with the comprehensive assessment to identify and address bottlenecks preventing migrants from accessing healthcare services, including HIV, tuberculosis, and malaria service at place of origin, transit, and destination.</p>
<p>The Nepalese Government covered less than 20% of the total HIV response budget in the 2020 fiscal year. Declining external and domestic resources for HIV pose challenges to securing the funding required to implement the NHSP 2021-2026.</p>	<p>Continue to support the Government for the finalization and endorsement of the NHSP 2021-2026.</p> <p>Provide technical support to conduct the National AIDS Spending Assessment (NASA) 2019-2020 to track and evaluate all expenditure on the HIV response.</p> <p>Support the Government to improve management of the Global Fund grants in Nepal including strengthening of oversight functions.</p>
<p>High turnover as well as limited and varied capacity of healthcare workers at federal, provincial, and local levels remain a significant challenge in advancing the HIV response.</p>	<p>Support implementation of the Global Fund grant, which includes funding for the recruitment of 700+ staff at provincial and local levels in health and laboratories facilities.</p>

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