

URUGUAY

Report prepared by the Joint UN Team on AIDS

JOINT TEAM

UNFPA, UNAIDS SECRETARIAT

JOINT PROGRAMME CONTRIBUTIONS AND RESULTS IN 2020-2021

The Joint Team collaborated with government, academic, and civil society organizations to generate strategic information on the HIV and sexual and reproductive health situation among adolescent and young people, including from key populations; expand and decentralize HIV and other sexually transmitted infection prevention services; and strengthen the remote longitudinal epidemiological surveillance system for HIV to ensure linkage with national health databases. Rapid HIV test kits were procured, and promotional materials were developed to support community-led initiatives. Heightened advocacy and technical support led to the implementation of multi-month dispensing of antiretroviral treatment and other chronic illness medications to overcome the impacts of COVID-19 on access to healthcare services. Mitigating actions were implemented following a study that identified the main social and epidemiological characteristics of migrants living with HIV. In partnership with government and networks of people living with HIV the Joint Team distributed food baskets comprising information on prevention of gender-based violence to people living with HIV; and provided temporary accommodation for homeless transgender women and people living with HIV from Montevideo during the COVID-19 pandemic. Law enforcement and prison officers were trained on various human rights issues, including integration of human rights, and gender and sexual diversity perspectives in their work and prevention and response to gender-based violence cases. The Joint Team also supported the Government to ensure the inclusion of human rights, gender equity and sexual diversity approach in the national human security and public policies.

HIV PREVENTION AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE AND KEY POPULATIONS

In collaboration with the Department of Sociology and Infectious Diseases Department at the University of the Republic, the Joint Team supported the development and launch of the report from the new Integrated Bio-Behavioural Surveillance (IBBS) Survey on sexual and reproductive health and HIV situation among gay men and men who have sex with men aged 15-19 years in Uruguay. The report presented key findings and recommendations to guide HIV programming and public policy reforms in the country.

The Joint Team and the *Grupo de Investigación sobre Sexualidades*— from the Social Sciences Faculty at the University of the Republic—led a study on the sexual and reproductive health and HIV situation among adolescents and young people aged 15-24 years in the capital Montevideo. The study which was conducted using social media networks and online platforms reached 1409 adolescents and young people including gay men and men who have sex with

men. Key study findings were presented at the 2021 International Human Rights Day commemoration event and at the National Council of Sexual Diversity (Ministry of Social Development).

Technical support was provided to the sub-national governments of Florida and Rocha in the decentralization of HIV prevention services and protection of the rights of people from the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) community. The Joint Team further supported the implementation of the *Rights, Diversity, and HIV Prevention* virtual campaign to promote the rights of the LGBTI community.

The Joint Team provided critical support to the Ministry of Public Health aimed at strengthening the national capacity to scale up HIV and sexually transmitted infections (STIs) programmes in Uruguay. For instance, 97 students and health professionals participated in the ninth edition of the Health and Sexual Diversity course organized by the University of the Republic, the Black Sheep Collective, Ministry of Public Health, and the Joint Team to improve their understanding of comprehensive health and sexual diversity. Technical support led to the update and strengthening of the remote longitudinal epidemiological surveillance system for HIV, and ensured its interconnectivity with other vital health databases in the country. The national HIV estimation 2020/2021 was also updated.

HIV TESTING AND TREATMENT

Intensive advocacy and technical support to the National AIDS Commission (CONASIDA) led to the implementation of multi-month dispensing (MMD) of antiretroviral therapy and other chronic illness medications for people living with HIV during the COVID-19 pandemic, in alignment with the World Health Organization's guidelines. The Joint Team assisted in the development and dissemination of 90 000 information brochures and donated 2000 rapid HIV testing kits to support the 2021 HIV testing promotion campaign across the country. A total of 500 rapid HIV testing kits were also procured to facilitate free community-led HIV testing services in commemoration of the 2020 World AIDS Day.

The Joint Team provided technical assistance for the first study in Uruguay which sought to identify the main social and epidemiological characteristics of migrants living with HIV. Key recommendations of the study were fully implemented to increase access to HIV prevention, care, and treatment services among the target populations.

The Joint Team in partnership with the Ministry of Social Development and several networks of people living with HIV and civil society organizations, including International Community of Women Living with HIV (ICW), Asociación de Ayuda al Sero Positivo (ASEPO), and Partners of Americas, distributed food baskets to vulnerable people living with HIV during the COVID-19 pandemic. Information cards on gender-based violence, including violence due to sexual orientation and gender were also included in thousands of food baskets that were distributed to the most vulnerable and key populations.

HUMAN RIGHTS, GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE, STIGMA, AND DISCRIMINATION

The Joint Team supported the Gender Policy Division of the Ministry of Interior for the inclusion of human rights, gender equity and sexual diversity approach in the national human security and public policies.

Additionally, 400 police officers from Montevideo city and sub-national level were trained on the integration of human rights, and gender and sexual diversity perspective in their daily police activities. A total of 280 police officers, including prison officers from Montevideo and sub-national level were also trained on the promotion of empathetic and violence-free social

relationships, including the prevention and response to gender-based violence cases, as well as homophobic and transphobic violence. Two nationwide virtual conferences further brought together 300 police officers from the 19 departments for discussions on human rights, gender, and diversity perspectives in police practices.

The network of adolescents and young people affected by HIV/AIDS (Jóvenes Alentando a la Vida) and ASEPO was supported to implement an awareness raising campaign on sexual and reproductive health and HIV via various social networks and the online platform of the Health Division of Montevideo Municipality, reaching a network of 24 first level health care centres in the country. The topics included “Undetectable = Untransmittable (U=U)”, treatment adherence, human rights, response to stigma and discrimination, and promotion of free HIV hotlines. A video clip entitled *La MalnaSida* was also produced with active participation of women living with or affected by HIV to increase public awareness around the human rights of adolescents and women living with HIV. The video was launched by the National AIDS Commission on the commemoration of the 2021 World AIDS Day.

The Centre for Affirmative Psychology for the LGBTI community (CAPA) at the Faculty of Psychology (Northern Regional Centre of the University of Republic) and the Joint Team collaborated to develop and launch remote training sessions on the life experiences of people from the LGBTI community. These included issues like identity, childhood, coming out, sexual and reproductive health and HIV, and HIV prevention and care services during the COVID-19 pandemic. They also worked together to implement a repository of videos on five remote training sessions and support materials for training and resource documents for each topic included in the training and publish an academic article on affirmative accompaniment for mothers and/or fathers of LGBTI youth. The Joint Team and CAPA also implemented a study on families’ experiences with their LGBTI sons and daughters from to produce key inputs for educational and social public policies.

The Joint Team collaborated with the secretaries of diversity and gender equality at the Montevideo Municipality to provide 30 homeless transgender women and people living with HIV from Montevideo with accommodation for four months and psychosocial support to help them overcome the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Experiences from this programme were documented as good practice to scale up these services for young people living with HIV, migrants, and people from the LGBTI community across the country.

In commemoration of the 29 July National HIV Response Day, the Joint Team supported the development of various awareness raising materials on prevention of HIV, COVID-19, and HIV-related stigma and discrimination which were shared via social media networks and online platforms.

CONTRIBUTION TO THE INTEGRATED SDG AGENDA

The Joint Team made significant contribution to advance the national HIV response, including through promotion and protection of the sexual and reproductive health and rights of all people, and on the prevention of violence based on gender and sexual identity. These initiatives directly contributed to the implementation of the Uruguay’s United Nations Cooperation Framework for Sustainable Development (UNSDCF) 2021-2025, and its strategic priorities on improving access to high-quality education, social protection and health to all people; and ensuring a society that protects the most left behind and promotes their autonomy.

Technical assistance was provided to the Government, academia, and civil society for the implementation of the Montevideo Consensus on Population and Development and the Nairobi commitments, within the framework of the 2030 Agenda to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

CHALLENGES AND LESSONS LEARNED

The COVID-19 pandemic and changes in Government presented significant challenges to the national HIV response.

The pandemic had a devastating socioeconomic impact; increasing gender-based violence; leading to the disruption of services at primary health care centres, including routine consultations and HIV testing; delays and cancellations of planned programme activities; and Government prioritization of COVID-19 and subsequently a diversion of public expenditure from the HIV response, particularly HIV programmes implemented by civil society organizations.

Pandemic-related lockdowns and social restrictions required intensive and creative use of virtual collaboration across the country. However, lessons learned showed that virtual engagements could not necessarily ensure active participation of the most vulnerable groups. There is also an urgent need to assess the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic and the disruption of health services on the health outcomes of people living with HIV and other chronic illnesses – particularly on untreated chronic diseases, pregnancy control, untimely HIV, STIs, and tuberculosis diagnosis and enrolment on treatment.

Gender-based violence, including violence based on gender expression and identity, and sexual orientation is one of the main social and public health challenges in Uruguay. This is exacerbated by the fragmentation of the response, the lack of capacity of some institutions and key actors, and the weak intersectoral coordination. There is also a need to accelerate advocacy activities to secure commitment and prioritize the scale up of HIV and sexual and reproductive health and rights services, including for adolescent pregnancies, sexuality education and the protection of LGBTI rights.

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