

# ARGENTINA

Report prepared by the Joint UN Team on AIDS

## JOINT TEAM

UNHCR, UNICEF, UNDP, UNFPA, ILO, WHO-PAHO, WORLD BANK, UNAIDS SECRETARIAT, IOM, OHCHR

## JOINT PROGRAMME CONTRIBUTIONS AND RESULTS IN 2020-2021

*Despite the intensified socio-economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Joint Team made significant efforts to ensure Argentina sustains progress in priority areas of the HIV response. Extensive technical and financial support was provided to civil society organizations for strengthening access to HIV treatment, nutrition, and hygiene services, and information on COVID-19 prevention and management among vulnerable populations, including people living with HIV. Capacity building of healthcare providers and sub-national level programme monitoring contributed towards improving access and quality of prevention of mother-to-child transmission of HIV (PMTCT) services in the country. Scale up of combination HIV prevention services targeting key populations; revision of sexuality education guidelines; evidence gathering for condom programming; and awareness creation have led to the overall expansion of HIV prevention services among young people and key populations. The Joint Team also provided technical support and led advocacy efforts to scale up equitable HIV services for and address HIV-related stigma and discrimination affecting the growing refugee and migrant population in Argentina.*

## HIV TESTING AND TREATMENT

Further strengthening delivery of HIV testing and treatment services in Argentina, the National AIDS Programme (Ministry of Health) was supported to finalize the HIV self-testing algorithm and the development of a software that allows access to real-time data on viral load and CD4 count at a national level. The Joint Team also contributed to the development and implementation of the Socioeconomic Recovery Plan for Argentina, ensuring inclusion of people living with or affected by HIV and key populations in the COVID-19 response and social protection programmes. Technical assistance was provided to initiate implementation of multimonth dispensing (MMD) of antiretroviral treatment (ART) and online monitoring of retention in treatment by following the ART dispensing in pharmacies. However, disruptions in the supply chain delayed implementation of 3-month MMD during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Joint Team reallocated funds to provide financial and technical support to the *Red Bonaerense de personas viviendo con VIH*—a nongovernmental organization working with people living with HIV— to establish a network with 800 volunteers to assist vulnerable populations, including people living with HIV with delivery of food and hygiene supplies, ART, and gender-based violence (GBV) support. Since the network

was launched, more than 1300 requests were received from Buenos Aires City and the Buenos Aires, Chubut, Córdoba, La Rioja, Mendoza, Misiones, Rio Negro, Santa Cruz, Santiago del Estero, and Tucumán provinces. Out of the requests, 59% were related to food assistance, 24% to accessing ART, 11% to assistance needed with GBV, drugs abuse, and other cases; and 6% to psychological assistance, accompaniment, and support on using tools like WhatsApp, Zoom, and Facebook. To address these requests from the community, six civil society organizations established a national alliance known as *Mesa Nacional de Organizaciones de la Sociedad Civil de personas viviendo con VIH o afectadas por el VIH*— the National Committee of people living with HIV or affected by HIV.

In collaboration with the Argentinean Red Cross, the Argentine Federation for Lesbians, Gay, Bisexuals and Trans (FALGBT) and the Association of Transsexuals, Transvestites and Transgendered of Argentina (ATTTA), the Joint Team supported the distribution of 170 hygiene kits and 55 food baskets to vulnerable people, mostly transgender women, at provincial level to minimize the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. A brochure with information on HIV and COVID-19, GBV, sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) services, and details of helplines was also included in the kits.

### ELIMINATION OF MOTHER-TO-CHILD TRANSMISSION OF HIV

The Joint Team provided technical assistance for the revision of the Elimination of Mother-to-Child Transmission of HIV, Syphilis, Hepatitis B, and Chagas (EMTCT Plus) guidelines and inclusion of new prevention algorithms and protocols. A virtual training was also conducted for 120 healthcare workers from Rio Negro, Salta, San Juan, and Tucumán provinces improving their understanding of the new diagnostic and treatment guidelines for pregnant women and children.

Sub-national level monitoring and evaluation support was provided to guide the implementation of PMTCT services in Córdoba, Corrientes, Jujuy, and Santa Fe provinces, contributing towards the certification of EMTCT process.

### HIV PREVENTION AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE AND KEY POPULATIONS

Technical assistance to the National AIDS Programme led to the implementation of combination HIV prevention services targeting key populations in Buenos Aires, Mar del Plata, San Juan, and Tucumán cities with strong linkages with provincial and municipal AIDS programmes and active involvement of civil society organizations serving the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) community. Besides, the Joint Team supported 15 cities and municipalities in four provinces to sign the Paris Declaration on Fast-Track Cities and secure commitments to create municipal-level HIV programmes with defined combination prevention action plans. Support for the implementation of these programmes will be a priority for 2022.

To scale up evidence-based HIV prevention programmes, the Joint Team supported a study on the acceptance of female condom in Buenos Aires. The survey revealed high acceptability of female condom, for the first time in Argentina. Around 98% of the participants agreed that it should be incorporated in the public health policy, 97% said their sexual partner accepted its use, 96% confirmed that they would recommend its use, and 80% said they would use it again. Key findings of the study were presented to government authorities, development partners, and the media, and will be used to inform condom policy and programming.

Technical assistance to the Ministry of Education and a collaboration with the civil society organization SES Foundation resulted in a revised curriculum guidelines for comprehensive sexuality education ensuring integration of lessons on HIV prevention and care. This also included the development of audiovisual components and webinars on combination prevention, stigma and the human rights approach for teachers, young people, and families.

Information, education, and communication (IEC) materials on COVID-19 and HIV prevention were developed in partnership with the European Union and the Secretary of Human Rights at the National Ministry of Justice and Human Rights. The IEC materials were produced in Spanish and disseminated widely through the social networks of all participating institutions. They were translated into Arabic, Creole, English, French, Romani, and Wolof languages for their dissemination among migrants and refugees.

### GENDER INEQUALITIES, HUMAN RIGHTS, STIGMA AND DISCRIMINATION

The Global Partnership for Action to Eliminate all Forms of HIV-Related Stigma and Discrimination Argentina Chapter was supported to roll out its national action plan focussing on two key priority areas of the strategy—education and communities. The Joint Team also provided technical and financial assistance to complete the Stigma Index 2.0 with a broad gender perspective and leadership of the national network of adolescents and young people living with HIV—*La Red Argentina de Jóvenes y Adolescentes Positivos* (RAJAP).

In 2020-2021, the Joint Team actively advocated for transgender children and adolescents' rights to be better recognized and their needs addressed. Technical and financial support was provided to four municipalities—Río Cuarto (Cordoba Province), Santiago del Estero, Concordia, and Quilmes to conduct a situation analysis on transgender children and adolescents in their respective cities. Results will support design of specific programmes to respond to the needs of transgender children and adolescents.

The Joint Team assisted Cuyo University, Faculty of Medicine to develop a module for their online post-graduate diploma course entitled *HIV and Human Rights Comprehensive Responses*. The course seeks to train medical and other public health professionals and trainers on comprehensive clinical management of HIV, sexually transmitted infections (STIs), and COVID-19 with a focus on gender and human rights aspects.

As an implementing member of the Quito Process—a government mechanism established to coordinate a regional response to the growing migration of Venezuelan nationals in Latin America and the Caribbean—Argentina's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Health were supported to promote and scale up inclusive HIV services. Heightened advocacy and technical assistance led to 12 member countries, including Argentina, committing to: a) strengthen access to health services and assistance mechanisms among migrant people and refugees living with HIV; b) standardise and ensure access to ART services and accelerate transition to Dolutegravir- based regimens; c) eliminate stigma and xenophobia against migrant people and refugees living with HIV by ensuring labour and social integration of migrant people living with HIV in their host communities; and d) design and implement a regional campaign against stigma and discrimination adding the voice of migrant people living with HIV and people from the LGBTI community.

### CONTRIBUTION TO THE INTEGRATED SDG AGENDA

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Joint Team's activities contributed to the implementation of the five pillars of the United Nations Framework for the Immediate Socio-Economic Response to COVID-19, substantially contributing towards pillars 1 (health), 2 (social protection) and 5 (resilience of communities).

Technical support was provided to the Government and civil society partners ensuring continuity of HIV services and availability of ARTs, including progressive implementation of MMD—in line with pillar 1. Under pillars 2 and 5, the Joint Team assisted civil society organizations and community networks in creating platforms to monitor human rights issues and social protection among vulnerable and key populations. Personal protective equipment was provided to organizations that work with vulnerable groups, including people living with HIV, migrants, and people from the LGBTI community. Similarly, intense advocacy resulted in the inclusion of vulnerable and key populations in health, including HIV, and social protection programmes and

as priority group for COVID-19 vaccination. Coordination with the regional Joint Team in advancing the Quito Process pushed HIV at the top of the multi-country response to Venezuelan migrants in the region and the nomination of Argentina as a champion country.

## CHALLENGES AND LESSONS LEARNED

Since mid-2018, Argentina continues to face a severe financial crisis, which has been exacerbated by the socio-economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and had significant implications on the national HIV response. The pandemic forced shifting specialized medical personnel to the COVID-19 response, limiting and, in some areas, disrupting healthcare services, including HIV and tuberculosis services. In response, the Joint Team quickly adapted its work to address the most urgent needs to protect lives through sustaining HIV services including through innovative approaches in close collaboration with the national HIV programme and communities.

Argentina implemented MMD to ensure continuity of ART during the pandemic, however this was met with implementation challenges, including high cost of generic first line antiretroviral drugs, and limitations of the supply chain. Although this situation has slightly improved, the current MMD is limited to two or three months depending on the treatment plan.

The national HIV response continues to be plagued with increased HIV and STI (mainly syphilis) incidences among young gay men and other men who have sex with men; persistent high levels of HIV prevalence among transgender women; mother-to-child transmission of HIV rate persisting at <4%; and high number of people living with HIV (more than 25% with late diagnosis) who are initiating treatment at a later stage of the HIV infection. Low investment (less than 25%) on HIV prevention programmes, which became more acute during the COVID-19 pandemic, contributed to the challenge. Pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) is currently offered only through development partner- and community-led pilot programmes. There is a need to integrate PrEP services in the national health policy and three health subsystems—public, private, and social security to ensure access for all people at higher risk of HIV infection.

The Joint Team made significant progress in securing commitment for the implementation of the Fast-Track Cities initiative in 12 municipalities, including the design of municipality HIV programmes and action plans, and improved coherence between different levels of government. Exhorted effort is needed to maintain the commitment, ensure sustainability of the programme, monitor progress, and bring in other municipalities that have expressed interest in joining the initiative.

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