

BELARUS

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
By the end of 2021, 90% of people who use drugs have access to the HIV comprehensive prevention programmes; coverage of key populations by HIV testing is doubled.	ON TRACK	In 2020, 51.7% of men who have sex with men, 60.3% of people who use drugs, and 73.5% of sex workers had access to prevention programmes, compared to 43%, 77% and 48% in 2019, respectively. In 2020, HIV testing coverage increased to 76.2% for men who have sex with men, 78.5% for people who use drugs and 83.1% for sex workers, from 23%, 23%, and 22% in 2018 respectively (IBBS 2020).
By the end of 2021, relevant stakeholders mobilized, amendments to the related legislation made, and favourable legal environment created to remove punitive laws and policies as a barrier to access to HIV prevention and treatment.	ON TRACK	Joint Team efforts to mobilize relevant stakeholders resulted in an agreement with the Ministry of Health and the Parliament to remove articles of the Criminal Code criminalizing HIV and STI transmission and exposure.
By 2021 total domestic spending for HIV prevention, treatment and care is doubled compared to 2018. 25% of total HIV spending focused on prevention among key populations and is increased by 50% compared to 2018.	ON TRACK	Total expenditure for HIV in 2020 increased by 22.6% compared to 2018, due to increased domestic funding: US\$ 33 268 114 in 2020 (US\$ 25 733 566 in 2018); domestic fund share was 91% in 2020 and 87% in 2018. However, spending on key populations (8.6% in 2018) decreased even further in 2020 to 4.9%.

JOINT TEAM

UNHCR, UNICEF, UNDP, UNFPA, UNODC, UNESCO, WHO, UNAIDS SECRETARIAT, IOM, OHCHR, UNRCO

JOINT PROGRAMME CONTRIBUTIONS AND RESULTS IN 2020

Through capacity building and technical assistance, the Joint Team has been partnering with healthcare institutions to provide multidisciplinary testing, counselling, treatment and care services for people living with HIV and key populations in Belarus. One focus in 2020 was the provision of prevention services for people who use drugs through research and the establishment of new opioid substitution therapy (OST) clinics. Prevention strategies were expanded through online approaches, offering counselling, referrals and information for hard-to-reach groups; young people also benefitted from online discussions on sexual and reproductive health (SRH), alongside education in schools and youth-friendly health centres. In partnership with community-based organizations, sustained advocacy to decriminalize HIV transmission and exposure is participating in establishing an enabling environment for people living with HIV to access health services and ensure their human rights.

HIV TESTING AND TREATMENT

CAPACITY BUILDING; TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE; ADVOCACY

Joint advocacy efforts with community-based organizations and the Ministry of Health resulted in the signing of a new voluntary licensing agreement to enable greater access for dolutegravir-based regimens, potentially benefiting over 20 000 people living with HIV currently receiving ART and those who will be diagnosed in the future.

Twenty-six specialists coordinated services for 2000 people living with HIV on adherence to ART across nine cities. Capacity-strengthening support was provided to multidisciplinary teams, including peer counsellors, social workers, an infectious disease doctor, epidemiologist, and lab specialist, and to equip their HIV dispensary department. These teams are working to improve linkages to care and treatment adherence for people living with HIV in Minsk city.

Consolidated inputs were provided to the new state programme 'People's Health and Demographic Security' to ensure the inclusion of priorities, activities and indicators related to new HIV targets by 2025 (95-95-95), as well as gender-sensitive services such as implementation of cervical cancer screening and HPV vaccination, family planning, prevention and SRH education.

PREVENTION FOR YOUNG PEOPLE AND KEY POPULATIONS

TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE; CAPACITY BUILDING

Technical and financial support was provided to an NGO delivering 10 in-person training sessions for 787 secondary special education teachers in Minsk and six oblasts, covering adolescent SRH, HIV prevention, testing and counselling, use of psychoactive substances, and improvement of referral mechanisms to youth-friendly health centres. A follow-up training was delivered through seven online webinars, in which 450 teachers, psychologists and healthcare providers from all regions participated. These webinars were then shared online, reaching a further 1330 specialists, to advance non-discriminatory environments in schools and residential care institutions for children with chronic disease and disabilities including HIV.

Twenty-three adolescents living with HIV (13 boys and 10 girls) strengthened their leadership skills during the second edition of the summer camp, focusing on reproductive and mental health, prevention of risky behaviour and introduction of peer-to-peer counselling both among adolescents affected by HIV and their peers.

Training on HIV pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) was provided to a range of specialists, including 260 health care professionals in all seven regions of Belarus. In addition, 800 specialists were equipped with knowledge of HIV prevention services through a series of 17 trainings in nine cities, covering HIV testing and counselling, social support and referral, and HIV prevention through building partnerships with key populations. Likewise, 10 online counsellors were trained on psychological support and referral services for key populations.

An NGO delivering HIV prevention services to men who have sex with men and transgender people was supported to develop counselling and referral chatbots to increase uptake of hard-to-reach key populations. The chatbot is due for launch in 2021.

A study was conducted in Belarus to understand better the basic needs of people who use new psychoactive substances and stimulant drugs and the specific challenges that hinder their access to medical and social services. A total of 200 people including people who use drugs, men who have sex with men, sex workers and their clients, and transgender people from three Fast-Track cities (Minsk, Svetlahorsk and Salihorsk) participated in focus group discussions and replied to an anonymous online survey.

Three more OST clinics have opened (two in Vitsiebsk and one in Minsk), and the Joint Team supported procurement of three automatic OST dose dispensers. Additionally, the first service centre for transgender people opened in Belarus in August 2020, and has already provided HIV testing, prevention, counselling, and psychosocial support services for 50 people.

HUMAN RIGHTS, STIGMA AND DISCRIMINATION

CAPACITY BUILDING; TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE; COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT; POLICY DIALOGUE

In 2020, the Joint Team collectively led the advocacy to remove Article 157 (criminalizing HIV exposure and transmission) from the Criminal Code by 2021, which included working with the Ministry of Health and Parliament, while building the capacity of the judiciary system and law enforcement on HIV decriminalization.

A comprehensive legal environment assessment in the context of HIV (LEA) was conducted in 2020-2021 to review the national legislature against international human rights standards, identify punitive laws and practices impeding effective response to HIV and elaborate coherent recommendations for amending such laws, tackling stigma and discrimination against people living with HIV and key populations, and ensuring better access to HIV prevention and treatment. LEA recommendations and proposals for amending national legislation have been formalized and are to be disseminated among key stakeholders to advocate law and policy reform in the context of HIV. The recommendations include decriminalization of HIV transmission, patient confidentiality, protection from forcible testing and treatment, revision of anti-drug legislation, adoption of a comprehensive anti-discrimination law and equal access for people living with HIV and key populations to labour, education and other social benefits.

Policy briefs were developed for investigative and judicial authorities, regarding good practices in handling and resolving drug-related cases and of progressive restorative justice approaches. Support was provided for the inclusion of alternative measures to incarceration for people who used drugs—including continuity of care before, during, and after imprisonment—and drug-related crimes, into the state health programme for 2021-2025.

As part of the implementation of the Information Strategy on HIV for 2019-2023, production of three learning videos for media practitioners on the usage of non-discriminatory language in media was supported. Two videos focused on HIV-neutral language and techniques to avoid stigmatizing wording, misleading and stereotyping of HIV, one video was devoted to applicable practices to talk and write about drug use without causing harm to the drug users. This learning course reached 1698 views through one platform only. Moreover, six online training sessions were organized to build the capacity of 20 young activists on the promotion of a human rights approach and anti-discrimination messages for social networking. Modules were delivered by journalists, popular bloggers and podcasters.

Technical and financial assistance was provided to the Centre of Social Support, for women who have been victims of stigma and discrimination and who are particularly vulnerable to HIV, including OST users. In 2020, 80 women were provided with social and legal assistance, four of whom regained their parental rights.

Sociological research with participation of 30 people living with HIV, people who use drugs and service providers was conducted to identify societal barriers to the full realization of their rights and obstacles for efficient human rights protection. The research findings contributed to the LEA recommendations and policy briefs for the representatives of the judiciary, to inform of good practices and progressive approaches to resolving HIV-related cases.

INVESTMENT AND EFFICIENCY **POLICY DIALOGUE; TECHNICAL SUPPORT; PARTNERSHIPS**

With technical and financial support from the Joint Team, and in partnership with the Government, an international nongovernmental organization and the Global Fund, an allocative efficiency modelling analysis was conducted to formulate the best resource allocation across a mix of HIV programmes. The analysis recommendations informed development of the new state HIV Prevention Programme 2021-2025, the National Strategic Plan 2021-2025 and the Global Fund funding application 2022-2024.

CONTRIBUTION TO THE COVID-19 RESPONSE **TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE; CAPACITY BUILDING; COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT**

The Joint Team supported a national dialogue on the COVID-19 response and the submission of a tailored application to the Global Fund. The additional funding received amounting to US\$ 9 606 437 was allocated to ensure continuity of treatment and prevention services for people living with HIV and key populations, as well as to mitigate the negative impact of COVID-19 on the national health system and communities.

Of the 18 500 people receiving ARV treatment in Belarus, 13 000 on the Tenofovir-containing ARV regimen were at risk of interruption to treatment due to COVID-19-related restrictions. Through collaboration between the Joint Team, the Ministry of Health, INGOs, civil society organizations, and the Belarusian association of people living with HIV, an agreement was reached with the pharmaceutical company CIPLA to donate 6000 ARVs and prevent stockouts in the country. Continuation of HIV testing services was also supported. For instance, 300 people were tested in 2020 through collaboration with civil society organizations to reach homeless people in Minsk.

Various studies were conducted, including an impact study of COVID-19 on the internet drug trade in Eastern Europe and Central Asia to improve the overall understanding of the scope and variety of drugs traded through the internet, in the context of COVID-19, and to further improve delivery of HIV, harm reduction and medical services. Findings were incorporated into an electronic guide for HIV harm reduction services with eight animated videos to introduce online delivery of services for state and NGO providers, including community-based organizations. Additionally, 502 young people participated in a 'survey that was conducted to develop needs-oriented programmes for youth in SRH, HIV prevention, healthy behaviour and social aspects. In addition, two rounds of rapid needs assessments were conducted among people living with HIV and key populations in the context of COVID-19, to identify potential gaps in terms of their health, social and economic needs, and mobilize resources accordingly.

Online courses and tools were developed to educate adolescents and youth on COVID-19, including a chatbot, through which 110 young people received COVID-19 related information. Throughout 2020, the Joint Team continued to build the self-esteem and leadership skills of adolescents and young people living with HIV. Specifically, 16 young leaders (including young people living with HIV) conducted seven trainings for 98 young people living with HIV, and 360 offline and online consultations for young people. The Joint Team developed 6620 items of information materials and disseminated them among target groups in all regions.

Online educational resources were developed for pregnant women and their families to ensure remote health education and counselling during pregnancy despite COVID-19-related restrictions, including health literacy, self-care and awareness of the importance of antenatal care services. Thousands of pregnant women are expected to be reached annually, including rural women and women with disabilities; in 2020 the online resources were accessed by an average of 11 000 unique viewers per article.

CONTRIBUTION TO THE INTEGRATED SDG AGENDA

By providing for people's basic social needs, the Joint Team contributed to the progressive realization of human rights and narrowing of social and gender inequalities in Belarus, thus contributing to SDGs 5, 10 and 16 and the "Leaving no one behind" principle. Social assistance interventions (such as the work with the Centre of Social Support) counteracting discriminative laws and administrative practices not only help to prevent the HIV epidemic through strengthening HIV prevention, testing, treatment, and ART adherence, but also decrease the level of stigma and discrimination among key and vulnerable populations in Belarus.

PERSISTING AND EMERGING CHALLENGES AND BOTTLENECKS	KEY FUTURE ACTIONS TO RESPOND TO CHALLENGES AND UNBLOCK BOTTLENECKS
<p>The compound effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and the political crisis that followed the presidential election have led to a dramatic impact on the socio-economic situation in the country, impeding the national HIV response, in particular towards key and vulnerable populations.</p>	<p>Support the reinvigoration of the HIV-prevention agenda to make it more responsive to key populations' needs.</p> <p>Conduct/finalize epidemiological and socio-behavioural studies to support identification of optimal combinations of targeted behavioural, biomedical and structural programmes to better reach key populations.</p> <p>Assist in strengthening national and sub-national data collection, to improve population size-estimates, service delivery access and linkages.</p>
<p>Punitive policies and/or laws present barriers to HIV-prevention, treatment and care, and impede domestic funding for key populations, such as sex workers. The current political crisis also seriously negatively affects the registration of women-driven civil society organizations, and creates barriers to implementing anti-discrimination and gender equality measures.</p>	<p>Support development of regulatory frameworks, policies and strategies for monitoring rights violations and ensuring access to justice.</p> <p>Build capacity of the legislature and executive on legal environment assessments, in the context of HIV. Sensitize law enforcement officials on HIV-related issues and rights of people living with HIV.</p>
<p>Criminalization and incarceration are the primary approach to addressing personal use of illicit drugs, increasing stigma and discrimination, decreasing availability and accessibility of HIV and harm-reduction services, and driving people who use drugs away from available services. Despite opening three new OST sites, the number of patients in OST is continuing to decline.</p>	<p>Advocate for the repeal and/or changes to restrictive and punitive laws and policies on drugs and the criminalization of transmission of sexually transmitted infections and HIV.</p> <p>Continue to advocate for alternative measures to incarceration for people who use drugs.</p> <p>Continue to advocate, provide evidence and strategic information for sustaining and scaling-up effective and rights-based combination prevention programmes for people who use drugs and their sexual partners, including OST.</p>

Report available on the
UNAIDS Results and Transparency Portal

open.unaids.org