

EL SALVADOR

Report prepared by the Joint UN Team on AIDS

JOINT TEAM

UNICEF, WFP, UNDP, UNFPA, UN WOMEN, WHO-PAHO, UNAIDS SECRETARIAT, IOM

JOINT PROGRAMME CONTRIBUTIONS AND RESULTS IN 2020-2021

In El Salvador, the Joint Team mainly focused its efforts on supporting the Government to mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, ensuring the continuity of HIV services, and reducing the vulnerability of people living with HIV. An assessment on food security among vulnerable people living with HIV was conducted and nutritional assistance was extended to households of people living with HIV, including pregnant and breastfeeding women living with HIV who were identified as food insecure. Young returnees were supported to establish micro businesses. New strategic data on the HIV prevention and treatment cascades will inform better targeted programmes. National guidelines were developed to support training of healthcare workers providing the prevention of mother-to-child transmission of HIV (PMTCT), syphilis, and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs) services. A medical call centre was established to scale up access to adolescent-friendly and accurate information, counselling, and referral services for various health concerns, including HIV, sexual and reproductive health (SRH), and mental health. In partnership with the private sector and academia, the Joint Team established a programme, which included HIV and STI prevention modules to facilitate job and internship opportunities for young people. Special offices for domestic violence cases were established and officers were trained to improve services for women who survived sexual violence.

HIV TESTING, TREATMENT AND CARE FOR IMPROVED ADHERENCE AND WELLBEING

Thanks to technical support by the Joint Team, El Salvador became the first country to prepare data for the HIV treatment cascade in line with the World Health Organization's recommendation. The data was also integrated with the unified HIV Monitoring, Evaluation and Epidemiological Surveillance System for HIV (SUMEVE) and will inform continued efforts to achieve the 95-95-95 targets.

The national guidelines to train healthcare providers on delivery of quality PMTCT, syphilis, and STIs services was updated by the Ministry of Health with Joint Team's supported. They cover the entire management protocol for pregnant women, including diagnosis, control during

pregnancy, administration of antiviral medicines, and follow-up during delivery and postpartum for both the mother and the exposed child. Technical advice was also provided to the Government for the procurement of the annual antiretroviral treatment (ART) supply needed for 2020-2021 through the PAHO Strategic Fund.

In 2020, the Joint Team provided technical assistance for an assessment that examined the state of food security among people living with HIV affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. In summary, results showed elevated vulnerability to food insecurity among people living with HIV. In particular, it revealed inadequate access to education and decent jobs with 8 out of 10 people who participated in the study dependent on the informal sector for their income and stating being vulnerable to food insecurity due to their income volatility and precariousness and higher gaps in access to decent jobs with regular salaries among women, who depended mainly on commerce or services. Also, it showed increased use of coping means, including selling of assets to meet their and family needs further reducing future income generation (reported by around 45% of participating women and 19% of men). Findings from this assessment informed joint programming on HIV, and was used to support the inclusion of people living with HIV in social protection programmes, through the establishment of specific inclusion models at municipality level that guarantee the right to HIV diagnostic confidentiality.

To mitigate some of the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Joint Team supported 40 nutritionally vulnerable people living with or affected by HIV (82 women and girls and 58 children) with food assistance and commodity vouchers.

In partnership with the National HIV/AIDS Programme, the Joint Team procured and distributed 140 dignity kits to 140 women living with HIV, including 100 pregnant women, to improve their adherence to ART. A total of 1600 units of breast milk substitute were procured and distributed to 192 pregnant and lactating women who were enrolled on PMTCT services. Food assistance was also provided to 96 pregnant women for a 3-month period, while 83 HIV-exposed children received fortified complementary foods for a 6-month period.

A practical workshop was conducted for 14 healthcare professionals improving their skills on preparation of nutritious meals and nutrition counselling, and 26 healthcare workers from seven Comprehensive Care Centres (CAI) were trained on healthy diet.

In 2020-2021, the Joint Team continuously provided personal protective equipment (PPE) for the clinical care and vaccination teams of MINSAL; cold chain equipment and supplies were also procured to support COVID-19 vaccination efforts and accelerate vaccine coverage in the country.

HIV PREVENTION AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE AND KEY POPULATIONS

A medical telecentre led by the Ministry of Health, known as MINSAL Telecentro, was established, with the Joint Team's support, to provide remote counselling services on sexual and reproductive health (SRH), family planning and maternal health, HIV testing, COVID-19 vaccine, and mental health services for adolescents and young people. In 2021, an estimated 1686 adolescents and young people received counselling for various services and 3113 accessed remote mental health services from the telecentre. The recent survey on MINSAL Telecentro showed that 86.7% of the 131 people who responded to the interview rated the service as very good.

The Joint Team in collaboration with the Francisco Gavidia University-Computer Centre and the private sector, developed a Digital Skills Certification programme to facilitate job placement and internship opportunities and strengthen soft skills among a cohort of 25 young people. The programme included modules on HIV and STI prevention. The young people who participated in the 2020-2021 programme received US\$ 100 per month for six months contributing to their food and transportation expenses during the capacity building training.

Technical and financial support was provided to improve access to HIV prevention, testing, care and treatment, and mental health services and information among migrants and returnees in El Salvador. For example, 20 young women from a total of 178 returnees were assisted to establish businesses and have access to digital media, through the delivery of a digital basket, comprising a tablet, smart phone, and data packages for mobile internet. They also received skill building sessions empowering them to take advantage of the training programmes offered through digital technologies and improve their livelihoods.

The Joint Team provided technical assistance to strengthen the SUMEVE and ensure the quality of data generation on HIV prevention cascade among men who have sex with men, sex workers, and transgender people to better inform targeted programmes.

GENDER INEQUALITY AND GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

Thirty-six offices for domestic violence cases (known as UNIMUJER-ODAC) located in the National Civil Police were supported through the provision of 500 dignity kits for women who survived violence. One office in San Salvador was fully furnished and equipped for services. Thirty UNIMUJER officers who work on cases violence against women in the San Salvador and San Miguel branches received a 20-day training that included human rights issues and provision of care for women who survived sexual violence.

CONTRIBUTION TO THE INTEGRATED SDG AGENDA

As part of and guided by the United Nations Development Assistance Framework 2016-2021, the Joint Team continued to make valuable contributions to El Salvador's development efforts and the achievement of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. This included strengthening the Government's capacity, including human resources to ensure the quality of strategic information for timely decision-making for improved programming to reduce HIV inequalities and the overall sustainability of the national HIV response.

Support was also provided towards the establishment of the National Council for Sustainable Development, which is contributing to the monitoring of actions and goals, and the preparation of a voluntary progress report. Through the National Council, the Joint Team also provided technical assistance to develop and include integrated and coherent actions that leave no one behind.

The Joint Team ensured that all programme implementations were aligned with the relevant Sustainable Development Goals, through promotion of development-oriented policies that support productive activities; creation of decent jobs, entrepreneurship, creativity, and innovation; reduction of food insecurity and poverty eradication by increasing productivity and community empowerment.

CHALLENGES AND LESSONS LEARNED

Implementation of planned activities for the HIV response was significantly disrupted due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Globalization and digitalization of economic activities in El Salvador created a paradigm shift in the economy, stressing a need for transformation of traditional business models towards more digital and connected models. Lessons learned showed that digital skill building ought to be integrated into community empowerment programmes to ensure beneficiaries can effectively manage their businesses. The Digital Skills Certification programme also requires support from the Joint Team during the selection and training process to ensure coordination, assistance, and effective monitoring of the training participants.

Lack of adequate information on people who benefit from food support, limits follow-up on receipt, consumption, analysis on quality of diet, and impact of the intervention. Progress on the inclusion of HIV in the national Social Protection System remains slow as the public institutional framework that runs the system is still under reform.

More efforts are needed to accelerate El Salvador's progress towards the elimination of vertical transmission of HIV and syphilis such as intensive advocacy for sustained commitment from the Presidential House and the Office of the First Lady; support to the national EMTCT technical committee (expected to be established in 2022), and capacity building of healthcare workers providing PMTCT services.

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