

2020-2021 | ASIA AND PACIFIC

# THE LAO PEOPLE'S DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC

*Report prepared by the Joint UN Team on AIDS*

## JOINT TEAM

UNFPA, UNODC, WHO, UNAIDS SECRETARIAT

## JOINT PROGRAMME CONTRIBUTIONS AND RESULTS IN 2020-2021

*Access to treatment among people living with HIV was improved through the establishment of new point of care sites, implementation of community-led delivery and multimonth dispensing of antiretroviral therapy, and training of healthcare providers on treatment adherence and management of lost to follow up cases. The Joint Team worked with people living with HIV to ensure their inclusion as priority group for the COVID-19 vaccine and the development of an action plan aimed at mobilizing domestic and external resources to actively participate in the HIV response in addressing their needs. To ensure the wellbeing of adolescent and young people, the Joint Team made significant contributions in the development of the first national youth and adolescent development strategy comprising actions to improve access to tailored HIV services; training hundreds of healthcare providers on the delivery of adolescent and youth friendly services; and establishing a youth-friendly helpline and mobile app to provide information and support services. Consorted advocacy also led to the inclusion of in and out of school comprehensive sexuality education in the country's education and sports sector development plan. Pre-exposure prophylaxis services were launched in three provinces to reduce new HIV infections among vulnerable and key populations while a training manual was developed to address stigma, including self-stigma towards these groups. Based on the results from an assessment of available symptomatic treatment and counselling options, the Joint Team trained health care providers and supported implementation of comprehensive services in community-based centres to improve access and the quality of services for people who use or inject drugs.*

## HIV PREVENTION AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE

The Joint Team supported the Government to develop the first national youth and adolescent development strategy encompassing a HIV situation analysis among young people and proposed recommendations to enhance access to quality information and facility- and community-based HIV and sexually transmitted infections (STIs) prevention, testing, and treatment services. The strategy was disseminated to government partners in 15 provinces.

Technical support was continued for the *Adolescents and Youth Friendly Services (AYFS)* programme aimed at responding to the needs of adolescents and young people and improving access to sexual and reproductive health information and services. Under this programme,

350 healthcare workers in five provinces were oriented on the AYFS guidelines while 40 healthcare providers were trained on delivery of mobile outreach services. These efforts enabled more than 9900 adolescents and young people to access sexual and reproductive health information and services at health facilities and mobile outreach programmes. Capacity building was also provided for 20 counsellors to improve their skills on the delivery of youth-friendly mental health and psychosocial support. Furthermore, 13 AYFS rooms were established in three sub-national hospitals to provide sexual and reproductive health services for adolescent and young people and 73 peer educators from targeted factories were trained on sexual and reproductive health. To improve youth engagement, the Joint Team facilitated a series of consultations which galvanized discussion on various aspects of sexual and reproductive health and HIV among 2300 young factory workers.

The Joint Team supported the Vientiane Youth Centre to operate a helpline for youth friendly sexual and reproductive health, mental health, and psychosocial support and services. An estimated 8600 adolescents and young people, including people in COVID-19 quarantine centres used the helpline services in 2021. More than 11 119 people also accessed sexual and reproductive health services provided by the Vientiane Youth Centre in youth clinics and through mobile outreach initiatives.

Technical and financial assistance was provided to launch a promotional event for the Noi Yakhoo Mobile app—the first mobile app which provides access to quality sexual and reproductive health information in Lao language and referral to a helpline tailored towards adolescents and young people. Since its launch, the app was used by about 2500 adolescents and young people.

Intense advocacy by the Joint Team led to the inclusion of comprehensive sexuality education in the ninth National Education and Sports Sector Development Plan. Technical support was also provided to sensitize management staff of vocational training colleges in four southern provinces on comprehensive sexuality education which resulted in the senior management of Laos National University making a commitment to include comprehensive sexuality education in their curriculum.

Furthermore, the Joint Team trained 210 secondary school teachers in five provinces and 9000 pre-service teachers across the country to strengthen their skills on delivery of comprehensive sexuality education using the teacher's guidebook. As a result, 54 789 secondary students and 3200 vocational training college students received comprehensive sexuality education in 2021.

## HIV PREVENTION AMONG KEY POPULATIONS

As a result of technical and financial support, the 2020 Integrated Biological Behavioural Surveillance (IBBS) survey among female sex workers and men who have sex with men was completed. These key findings will inform advocacy, resource mobilization, and programming to improve HIV services among these populations across the Lao People's Democratic Republic. The Joint Team also assisted CHAS in setting up the HIV case surveillance dashboard to ensure effective and timely monitoring of HIV case reporting and trends in the country.

As part of the pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) expansion effort, the Joint Team worked with key stakeholders on the development of a PrEP implementation framework resulting in the rollout of these services in Champasak, Savannakhet, and Vientiane Capital provinces. Information, education, and communication materials promoting HIV prevention and PrEP services, including video, posters, booklets were produced for targeted distribution among key populations, particularly men who have sex with men.

Thanks to technical assistance, a training manual was developed, with focus on addressing self-stigma, and stigma in family, community, health and justice system for civil society organizations and local government counterparts working with hard-to-reach key populations. As a result, 70 participants received training to improve HIV prevention programmes targeting female sex workers and men who have sex with men. Additionally, 160 peer educators in two northern

provinces (Luangprabang and Sayyabouly) were trained to help establish a local network of men who have sex with men and support HIV awareness raising initiatives.

The Joint Team conducted an assessment to determine available symptomatic treatment and counselling options, effectiveness of services and gaps in all community-based treatment centres for drug use and dependence. The survey provided an in-depth understanding of challenges facing people who use drugs at community hospitals, including criminalization of drug use preventing people from accessing services; lack of information among people who use drugs and their families about available community-based drug treatments programmes; and insufficient capacity of healthcare professionals delivering drug treatment and counselling services. These findings were used as a baseline to measure progress on the current symptomatic treatment and counselling programme. Capacity building was provided for 56 healthcare professionals across the country to ensure the quality of care and compliance with international standards.

A refresher training was conducted for health care providers in 34 target community hospitals and 696 people who use drugs and 429 parents of young people who use amphetamine received counselling on drug dependence. Technical support was further provided for the implementation of comprehensive services, including treatment, counselling, and follow up for people who use and/or inject drugs in all community-based treatment centres and identification of relevant social services for referrals.

## HIV TESTING AND TREATMENT

In collaboration with the Association of people living with HIV/AIDS (APL+) the Joint Team advocated for the scale up of government- and nongovernmental organization-led antiretroviral treatment and care services for people living with HIV, especially for people who are in stable health conditions. The intense advocacy led to the establishment of two additional points-of-care sites in the Lao People's Democratic Republic for the delivery of antiretroviral treatment services for eligible people living with HIV.

The Joint Team provided technical assistance to the Government for the implementation of multimonth dispensing (MMD) and home delivery of antiretroviral treatment to warrant the continuity of services and treatment adherence among people living with HIV during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In collaboration with national partners, the national community-based antiretroviral treatment delivery model guideline, and community-led telehealth service guideline were developed to improve access to antiretroviral treatment, care, and support services for people living with HIV during the pandemic. These guidelines were distributed to healthcare providers and peer supporters working with people living with HIV in 11 antiretroviral treatment and seven Point of Care sites. Meanwhile, the Joint Team supported the *Mother and Child Health Centre* in drafting a standard operating procedure for the integration of HIV, hepatitis B and syphilis into routine maternal and child health services to accelerate progress towards the elimination of mother-to-child transmission (EMTCT) of these diseases.

APL+ was assisted to develop its Strategic Action Plan 2022-2030 that seeks to address the gaps in meaningful engagement of people living with HIV in the HIV response. The plan will also serve as a tool to raise domestic and donor resources for community- and government-led HIV programmes. In collaboration with APL+, the Joint Team successfully advocated for the prioritization of people living with HIV in the national COVID-19 vaccination programme and ensured confidentiality of their HIV status. Technical assistance was further provided to build the capacity of peer supporters working with people living with HIV, female sex workers, and men who have sex with men to expand access to accurate information on COVID-19 prevention and management. An informative video was also produced to strengthen the community-led COVID-19 response in the context to HIV.

The Joint Team worked with the University of Health Science and the Centre for HIV/AIDS and STI of the Ministry of Health (CHAS) to develop a pre-service curriculum on HIV for students at the University of Health Science aimed at reducing stigma and discrimination in healthcare facilities and address the lack of human resources in the HIV response.

Capacity building was conducted for 132 healthcare providers and community peer educators from 11 antiretroviral treatment sites to improve their skills on management of lost-to-follow up cases and treatment adherence, quality service delivery, dispensation of antiretroviral treatment, and index testing to increase case findings and reporting among people who are at higher risk of HIV infection. To improve access to the latest HIV testing and treatment guidelines and tools among healthcare providers, the Joint Team supported the distribution of 1200 copies of voluntary HIV testing and counselling logbooks, PrEP guidelines, treatment adherence counselling flipcharts, standard operating procedures for point-of-care treatment and lost-to-follow up services, and opportunistic infection guidelines.

As a result of technical support, a workshop was conducted for health workers in point-of-care and ART sites to improve the quality of data on the District Health Information System 2 (DHIS 2). The Joint Team also facilitated skill building initiatives to strengthen the capacity of members of the Provincial Committees for the Control of AIDS on HIV data analysis in provinces with increasing new HIV cases. These local partners were also trained to improve their skills on data analytics to execute evidence-based local advocacy for increased investment and improved HIV programmes at the local level.

### CONTRIBUTION TO THE INTEGRATED SDG AGENDA

The Joint Team worked with the United Nations Country Team to review progress and challenges in supporting the national HIV/AIDS response. The Joint Team also contributed to the Country Common Assessment to guide the development of the United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (UNSDCF) 2022-2026, with a particular focus on HIV and AIDS.

Technical and financial support was provided for campaigns that aimed at advancing progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly on the health and well-being of young people, climate change, protection of environment, and promoting gender equality. Over 18 000 adolescents and young people were engaged in the in-person activities and 1 090 000 young people were reached with messaging through various social media platforms.

The 2021 International Day of the Girl Child 2021, under the theme *Digital Generation: Technology and Innovations as Accelerators of Girls' Bodily Autonomy* created a platform for adolescents and young people, civil society, government bodies, the United Nations and other development partners to discuss, share and plan actions to address the numerous challenges Lao girls face, including lack of education, SRH, and nutrition services, unemployment, gender inequality, poor opportunities to participate in decisions-making, digital technology and online safety.

### CHALLENGES AND LESSONS LEARNED

Only 76% of people living with HIV have access to antiretroviral treatment, there are high numbers of AIDS-related deaths in public hospitals when compared to other communicable diseases, and while HIV prevalence continues to increase among key populations, there is low funding and service coverage for HIV prevention. Policy and structural barriers coupled with punitive laws, and high stigma and discrimination in health settings impede access to HIV services among key populations. In addition, HIV treatment, care, and support services are not widely integrated into the health system due to vertical implementation of antiretroviral treatment services across the country.

Large infrastructure projects across the country continue to attract thousands of internal and external migrant workers with little or no access to health services, increasing the vulnerabilities of workers and surrounding communities to HIV and other STIs. Limited knowledge of HIV and AIDS among the general population, including young people continue to put them at a higher risk of acquiring HIV—only 26.4 % of male and 16.8% of female have adequate knowledge on HIV/AIDS (LSIS II, 2017).

There is a need for government institutions and civil society organizations to increase capacities to deliver HIV services for key populations and vulnerable groups; however, they are unable to do so due to limited investment in capacity building of staff working in health and non-health sectors. In addition, new approaches and innovations are still in its infancy with limited geographic reach. Thus, there is a need for concerted advocacy for increased resources and active engagement of civil society in the HIV response.

The COVID-19 pandemic continued to pose serious challenges throughout 2021. Lockdown measures announced in the earlier part of the pandemic delayed implementation of several planned interventions. While virtual working modalities were adopted to overcome these challenges, lack of technology and low technical knowledge among different partners challenged some activities. Nonetheless, appropriate preparation, staff commitment, team resilience and relaxation of the lockdown allowed the implementation most of the planned activities and continuity of HIV services in 2021.

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