

# MAURITANIA

*Report prepared by the Joint UN Team on AIDS*

## JOINT TEAM

UNHCR, UNICEF, WFP, UNDP, UNFPA, WHO, WORLD BANK, UNAIDS  
SECRETARIAT, IOM, OHCHR

## JOINT PROGRAMME CONTRIBUTIONS AND RESULTS IN 2020-2021

*In 2020-2021, the Joint Team in Mauritania supported efforts to improve HIV testing, prevention of mother-to-child transmission of HIV, and referral services in the country, including through the capacity building of health professionals. The Integrated Biological and Behavioural Surveillance (IBBS) study and size estimation among key populations were also completed to inform the HIV response in Mauritania. The Government was supported to implement HIV self-testing aimed at strengthening case finding among vulnerable and key populations, while technical and financial assistance helped civil society organizations to expand HIV prevention among these groups. Teachers' guides were updated to scale up comprehensive sexuality education and increase knowledge of sexual and reproductive health, including HIV among adolescents and young people. Intensive advocacy by the Joint Team and civil society led to the inclusion of people living with HIV on the list of priority populations to access social protection programmes. Food and nutritional support and capacity building training on income generating activities were also provided to people living with HIV to help them overcome the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Finally, the Joint Team provided technical support for the mobilization of over than US\$ 19 million for the national HIV response.*

## PMTCT, HIV PREVENTION AND TESTING

To reinvigorate prevention of mother-to-child transmission of HIV (PMTCT) services in the country, the Joint Team conducted training for 36 midwives from PMTCT sites in Nouadhibou province to improve their skills in providing rapid HIV testing, recording test results, and referring positive cases to outpatient antiretroviral treatment centres.

The Joint Team provided technical and financial assistance during the development of the national strategies for HIV testing and differentiated HIV testing. Support was also provided for the rollout of a HIV self-testing pilot programme targeting key populations in four locations. By the end of 2021, over 750 self-tests were distributed; 61 people were found positive and 44 were effectively linked to treatment.

In addition, the Joint Team provided technical and financial assistance to civil society organizations to expand access to HIV prevention and referral services among key populations, in particular gay men and other men who have sex with men and female sex workers. A total of 733 people (144 women) were reached, and 185 people received HIV testing and counselling services; the nine people found positive were referred for antiretroviral therapy.

The Joint Team supported the updating and dissemination of teachers' guides to improve the delivery of comprehensive sexuality education and knowledge of sexual and reproductive health and HIV among adolescent and young people.

### CONTINUITY OF HIV SERVICES DURING COVID-19

In 2020, the Joint Team supported the development of the UN COVID-19 Socio-Economic Response Plan (SERP) to assist the Government in responding to the immediate impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result of concerted advocacy by the Joint Team and civil society, the Government included people living with HIV among the priority population groups outlined to benefit from the COVID-19 recovery mechanisms in the country.

The Joint Team also partnered with the Ministry of Health and networks of people living with HIV to ensure the continuity of antiretroviral treatment for people living with HIV during the pandemic-related curfews, border closures, and regional lockdown periods. Support was provided to the national network of people living with HIV (REMAP+) to assist people living with HIV regarding their transportation to treatment centres during the COVID-19 pandemic and related lockdowns. Also, as a result of intensive advocacy led by the Joint Team, multimonth dispensing (MMD) of antiretroviral medicines was implemented in Mauritania to allow the provision of three months' worth of antiretroviral medicines and ensure adherence to treatment.

To overcome the economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Joint Team provided food and nutrition support for 150 vulnerable people living with HIV in five towns in Mauritania, including the capital city, Nouakchott. Additionally, 26 people living with HIV received a total of US\$ 350 000 to start income generating activities to empower them to support themselves and their families during the pandemic and beyond.

Furthermore, the Joint Team supported national efforts to inform people on COVID-19 and prevention methods: around 1000 people living with HIV were reached by sensitization activities, 600 posters were disseminated, and over 1000 pieces of personal protection equipment (PPE) were distributed to people living with HIV.

### INVESTMENT AND EFFICIENCY

In 2020-2021, the Joint Team strongly contributed to successful advocacy efforts towards increasing domestic resources allocated to the national HIV response. Meanwhile, technical assistance was also provided to the Country Coordinating Mechanism (CCM) for the development of a successful Global Fund concept note securing more than US\$ 19 million for the national HIV, tuberculosis, and malaria responses for the 2022-2024 grant period.

The Joint Team supported the Government to develop the National HIV/AIDS and Sexually Transmitted Infections Strategic Plan 2022-2025 and the national HIV management strategy accelerate Mauritania's progress towards national and international targets. Moreover, under the Fast Track Cities initiative, the Government was supported in the development and implementation of a plan to accelerate the HIV response in Nouadhibou—the second largest city in Mauritania.

To strengthen evidence for the HIV response, the Joint Team supported in 2020 a mapping of areas with high presence of men who have sex with men in Kiffa, Néma, Nouadhibou, Nouakchott, Rosso and Zouerate, recording 211 sites across these six cities. The mapping supported the generation of size estimation data on men who have sex with men in the country.

The Joint Team also provided technical and financial support to REMAP+ for the rollout of the Stigma Index 2.0 study, which showed that among respondents living with HIV who stopped receiving their HIV treatment and care, 39.5% had experienced discrimination from a healthcare provider.

## **CONTRIBUTION TO THE INTEGRATED SDG AGENDA**

In 2020-2021, the Joint Team continued its support for the Mauritanian Government to attain the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) with a particular focus on the most vulnerable and key populations.

As part of the national health group, the Joint Team provided technical and financial support for the development of the Second Action Plan of the Strategy for Accelerated Growth and Shared Prosperity (SCAPP) 2021-2025. This included evaluation of the first action plan and integration of the lessons learned and best practices as well as priorities from SDGs, including the leave no one principle in the second plan.

## **CHALLENGES AND LESSONS LEARNED**

The COVID-19 pandemic had significant ramifications for the delivery of HIV and other essential services in Mauritania. The introduction of MMD of antiretroviral medicine largely contributed to solve the treatment disruptions for people living with HIV, ensuring they would not be left behind during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Critical bottlenecks in the national health system, including inadequate supply of medicines and human resources, and weak national structures and health information systems continued to challenge the national HIV response. Despite some improvements in recent years, insufficient domestic resources and persistent dependence on external funding further strained the sustainability of the national HIV response.

Access to HIV prevention and other services among key populations, particularly female sex workers and men who have sex with men remains low.

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