

PHILIPPINES

Report prepared by the Joint UN Team on AIDS

JOINT TEAM

UNICEF, UNDP, UNFPA, UNODC, WHO, UNAIDS SECRETARIAT

JOINT PROGRAMME CONTRIBUTIONS AND RESULTS IN 2020-2021

In the Philippines, the Joint Team sought to improve access to and coverage of HIV testing services by supporting the Government to lower the age of consent for HIV testing; developing new guidelines on HIV self-testing and partner notification services; implementing a plan to accelerate implementation of rapid HIV testing algorithms; supporting outreach and community mobilization efforts; capacitating civil society organizations to increase demand for and access to HIV testing and treatment services, and facilitating participation of key populations in the delivery of these services. A government advisory was issued for outpatient HIV/AIDS treatment (OHAT) packages to scale up delivery of antiretroviral treatment for people living with HIV during the COVID-19 pandemic. Technical support was provided for the assessment of the country's readiness to implement the Dolutegravir-based treatment transition plan. The Joint Team supported a campaign that mobilized over two million adolescents and young people for crowdsourcing innovative local HIV solution. Online courses were conducted to train schoolteachers on the delivery of comprehensive sexuality education in schools and a family-based initiative was implemented to help families improve parenting skills, relationships, and address stress positively as a drug use prevention strategy among young people. The Joint Team supported efforts to assess and promote health services in closed settings, including children in conflict with the law and people who use and/or inject drugs for those who use and inject drugs. An economic empowerment programme that included financial literacy and seed funding reached people living with HIV and key populations, particularly, female sex workers and transgender people to help them overcome the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Joint Team also supported the development of an HIV adaptive plan to ensure the continuity of HIV services during the pandemic. To ensure human rights protection of all people, the Joint Team assisted in the development of a human rights roadmap and the implementation of a social media campaign for equal rights and fair treatment of people from the LGBTQI community.

HIV PREVENTION AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE AND KEY POPULATIONS

The Joint Team supported the Government in the development of key guidelines to improve the delivery of combination HIV prevention services among key populations. These included the national guideline on pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) which was used to rollout the PrEP programme across the country; and standard operating procedures for combination HIV prevention service delivery for local government health units and HIV facilities, which is currently pending approval.

Under the Young House Heroes Initiative of the Council for the Welfare of Children (CWC), National Youth Commission (NYC), and Positive Youth Development Network (PYDN), the Joint Team provided technical and financial support for the High Five campaign that helps adolescents, young people, and their communities to develop and implement innovative HIV awareness raising and prevention programmes. The adolescent-led teams produced 32 creative outputs, 15 project proposals, 10 project pitches. A total of 6 adolescent-led teams were also awarded additional financial and technical assistance to implement their respective projects. The campaign engaged 2 189 311 adolescents and young people from 91 communities, and 113 local leaders, staff members of various government agencies and other duty bearers across the country to implement the co-created initiatives.

The Joint Team conducted two online courses for 245 schoolteachers who will serve as national trainers to improve the delivery of in-school comprehensive sexuality education in schools. Additionally, 15 local government units were also engaged for the implementation of the Strong Families Initiative—an evidence-based programme aimed at preventing initiation of drug use among young people. So far, over 1 500 families benefitted the programme across the country.

Technical and financial support was provided for the mapping of all adolescent-friendly health facilities providing various tailored services, including HIV and sexual and reproductive health services in the Philippines.

To create demand and improve access to harm reduction services in closed settings, the Joint Team hosted three webinars on community-based drug treatment and rehabilitation programmes reaching more than 500 staff members of several prisons across the country. Personal protective equipment and food packages were procured and donated to 15 prisons and other closed settings to overcome the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Technical support was provided for the development and dissemination of media campaign materials on COVID-19 prevention among prisoners and people in closed setting. Fifteen detention facilities benefited from the support. Additionally, technical support was provided for the implementation of an aftercare programme for people who use drugs, which includes follow-up therapy and support groups.

The Joint Team launched an economic empowerment programme for transgender and female sex workers and other women impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2021, the programme enrolled 216 people from these groups, who benefited from inputs to start their income-generating activities in Angeles, Cebu, Manila, and Pasay cities. A financial management training was also conducted in partnership with Siomai House, a private sector food company in the Philippines. Additionally, the Joint Team provided learning group sessions on adolescent sexual and reproductive health, gender-based violence, mental health, psychosocial support, and financial literacy for 50 underprivileged urban adolescent girls with risky sexual behaviours during the pandemic in the National Capital Region.

HIV TESTING AND TREATMENT

The Ministry of Health was supported in the revision of the national HIV case-based surveillance guidelines to lower the age of consent for HIV testing to 15 years and strengthen monitoring of pregnant women and people diagnosed with tuberculosis. Strengthening of advanced HIV disease (AHD) surveillance was also done through the inclusion of immunologic and clinical criteria for tagging AHD.

Technical support was provided for the development of new guidelines for HIV testing and counselling services that included differentiated service delivery models such as HIV self-testing and partner notification. In parallel, the Joint Team worked with the Committee on Children and HIV/AIDS (ComCHA) in the preparation of a position paper on the linkages of HIV testing, violence against women and children, and child protection and advocating for the inclusion of these services in the HIV testing and counselling guidelines. The Government approval process of the HIV testing and counselling guidelines is currently underway.

The Joint Team supported the development and implementation of the rapid HIV diagnostic algorithm (rHIVda) scale up plan. As a result, 31 of the 160 HIV treatment facilities in the country adopted rHIVda by November 2021 contributing to the significant improvement in the initiation of antiretroviral treatment. An estimated 76% of the people living with HIV confirmed through rHIVda in 2021 were enrolled on antiretroviral treatment whereas 68% of the people living with HIV confirmed through the central laboratory were initiated on treatment during the same period.

In the National Capital region, the Joint Team supported eight community-based organizations in high burden cities to develop and implement information and communication materials and activities aimed at generating demand for HIV testing and treatment services among key populations. Additionally, three community-based organizations were supported to establish key populations-led HIV service facilities. Following this development, the Joint Team advocated with local government units and AIDS councils to ensure the sustainability of these facilities.

To reinforce Philippines' efforts to transit eligible people living with HIV to the tenofovir disoproxil, lamivudine and dolutegravir (TLD) combination treatment and Dolutegravir-based (DTG) first line regimen, the Joint Team conducted a readiness assessment to analyze the country's capacity and readiness to implement and sustain the new treatment regimens ; supported the development of a transition plan, training materials, and implementation tools for healthcare providers and other stakeholders. The new TLD and DTG treatment regimens were approved by the Government in September 2021. Additionally, the Joint Team supported a survey to identify the needs of the community to transition to the tenofovir disoproxil, lamivudine and dolutegravir (TLD) combination treatment and ensure government funding allocation and procurement of adequate supplies.

The Joint Team supported implementation of innovative service delivery mechanisms to ensure the continuity of HIV and tuberculosis treatment services during the COVID-19 pandemic. For instance, technical and financial support was provided to the STRider (Specimen Transport Riders) network—a network of motorbike riders whose primary function is to transport sputum specimens and results for tuberculosis diagnosis—to include in their service the delivery of antiretroviral treatment among people living with HIV. The *ARVayanihan* project received financial assistance to expand free courier services and 45 e-bikes were donated by the Joint Team to the *Love on Wheels* project in the National Capital and Central Luzon regions to further facilitate dispensing of antiretroviral treatment.

Furthermore, technical assistance was provided to the national health insurance agency (PhilHealth) to develop and release an advisory that allows utilization of the outpatient HIV/AIDS treatment (OHAT) packages for antiretroviral treatment delivery in areas under enhanced community quarantine during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Joint Team supported two community-based organizations in high burden cities to provide free community-led referral and support services to people living with HIV, including women living with HIV. The initiative reached 30 people living with HIV in three cities with various services, including food and transportation support, and HIV education and testing. Information, education, and communication (IEC) materials on HIV referral and support services were developed and disseminated through social media platforms reaching 2100 viewers.

HUMAN RIGHTS, STIGMA, AND DISCRIMINATION

The National AIDS Council was supported in the development of the Human Rights Roadmap to address stigma and discrimination preventing people from accessing HIV services in six settings. The Joint Team also supported the development of a communication tool that articulates the policy direction of the National AIDS Council to mobilize both rights-holders and duty-bearers to address rights-based barriers to HIV-related programmes and services beyond the health sector. Technical assistance was further provided for the completion of the Joint Framework on Human Rights with a special focus on scale-up of drug control approaches to prevent human rights violations in the implementation of HIV programmes.

TLF Share—a non-profit organization working on HIV and human rights issues—was assisted to conduct a study on the correlation of HIV and COVID-19 pandemics in the context of human rights. The study highlighted the need for crises-sensitive HIV programmes and services, including the integration of HIV services under the Department of Health’s minimum essential health services in crisis situations; flexible government rules, regulations and requirements responsive to the demands for quick responses in times of crises like pandemics, calamities and disasters; improved information dissemination on social protection programmes and services; and integrated processes, systems and procedures to facilitate access to social protection services across all agencies that provide such programs and services. These results and key recommendations informed the development of the Socioeconomic and Peace Building Framework, particularly the priorities outlined under the People Pillar, including ensuring equitable and rights based social protection systems in the Philippines.

The Joint Team conducted a social media campaign aimed at promoting equal rights and fair treatment of people from the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) community. A total of 13 social media contents on these issues were produced and disseminated reaching at least 130 000 people and more than 11 000 active engagements.

CONTRIBUTION TO THE INTEGRATED SDG AGENDA

Under the Philippines Partnership Framework for Sustainable Development (2019-2023), the Joint Team made significant contributions to accelerate the country’s progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including SDG 3: Good Health and Wellbeing.

In 2020, a Common Country Assessment (CCA) was conducted to analyse and identify key development issues. The Joint Team actively supported its development, including through the conduction of studies: an assessment of the impact of COVID-19 on people living with HIV, and an evaluation of existing social protection programmes in emergency context. Both these studies generated key evidence that were used as reference in the development of the CCA.

The Socioeconomic and Peacebuilding Framework for COVID-19 Recovery (2020-2023) was developed and approved by the United Nations Country Team in January 2021. It provides a roadmap for prioritizing, aligning, and positioning the United Nations’ actions in the Philippines. The Joint Team particularly contributed to its “People” pillar, which includes work on supporting health systems and expanding social protection.

CHALLENGES AND LESSONS LEARNED

The COVID-19 pandemic, including reallocation of available financial and human resources to the pandemic response and suspension of non-COVID-19 programme activities led to the disruption of HIV and other essential health care services and delays in the implementation of HIV programmes and support activities in the Philippines. In 2021, the Joint Team focused its support to the National Capital Region, which was severely affected by the pandemic. However, some of the activities there were also affected due to competing pandemic-related priorities.

The need for more efficient harmonization and alignment between Government- and civil society-led HIV programmes and those funded or implemented by international partners, including the United Nations, Global Fund, and United States President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) remains a significant challenge in the national HIV response. There is a need to further monitor financial streams and co-financing as a portion of the funding of the HIV response has been transferred to Local Government Units. Lessons learned stressed the need to engage all stakeholders to ensure coordination during the early stages of work planning. Donor activities must also be aligned to the needs of communities and provide more flexibility in terms of geographic scope to anticipate shifting priorities. There is also a need to intensify advocacy for increased investment by the Joint Team and other international donors.

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