

# VENEZUELA

*Report prepared by the Joint UN Team on AIDS*

## JOINT TEAM

UNHCR, UNICEF, UNFPA, WHO-PAHO, UNAIDS SECRETARIAT

## JOINT PROGRAMME CONTRIBUTIONS AND RESULTS IN 2020-2021

*To accelerate Venezuela's progress towards the Fast-Track targets, the Joint Team supported the Government to further expand first-line antiretroviral treatment regimen, implement innovative treatment dispensing mechanisms, and train hundreds of health workers in 17 states for the delivery of HIV services. Dual HIV and syphilis rapid test kits and dry blood sampling kits for early infant diagnosis were procured to avoid stockout and ensure the continuity of prevention of mother-to-child transmission of HIV services in the country. The Joint Team also supported the scale-up of comprehensive sexuality education in schools and established new and updated existing comprehensive adolescent centres to improve knowledge of sexual and reproductive health, including HIV among adolescent and young people. More than 60 000 people were sensitized on gender-based violence while over 6000 adolescent girls and young women accessed violence-related support services. The National Protocol on the Clinical Management of Sexual Violence was also developed, and primary healthcare providers were trained on the implementation of the new protocol.*

## HIV TESTING AND TREATMENT

As a result of substantial technical and financial support from the Joint Team and the Global Fund, the Government expanded Dolutegravir-based first line treatment for children, adolescents, and adults living with HIV. These efforts helped increase antiretroviral treatment coverage among all people living with HIV from 28% in 2018 to 55% in 2021.

The Joint Team continued providing technical and financial backing to the Ministry of Popular Power for Health for the implementation of the multimonth dispensing (MMD) of antiretroviral treatment for eligible people living with HIV to ensure the continuity of services and adherence to treatment during the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2021, an estimated 56 116 eligible adults and 1198 children living with HIV were accessing their treatment through a 3-month MMD in Venezuela.

To attain decentralization of HIV treatment and care services from hospitals to primary healthcare centres, the Joint Team supported the training of 894 healthcare workers in 17 states on the delivery of first level of care among people living with HIV.

### **PMTCT AND FAMILY TESTING**

Despite the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the current international economic sanctions on Venezuela, the Joint Team reprogrammed funds and mobilized additional resources to procure and distribute 120 125 units of dual HIV/syphilis rapid test kits for 14 priority states. Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, this support helped increase antenatal screening from 57% in 2019 to 62% in 2021, and increased PMTCT coverage from 17% in 2019 to 27% in 2021. A total of 1200 dry blood sampling kits were also procured to scale up early infant diagnosis among HIV-exposed children.

### **HIV PREVENTION AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE AND KEY POPULATIONS**

Technical support was afforded for the implementation of the national Plan for the Prevention and Reduction of Child and Adolescent Pregnancy (PRETA). The plan comprises the provision of comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) in line with Venezuela's Ministerial Resolution 42063 which encourages inclusion of CSE in the basic education system. The Joint Team further supported the development of CSE school curriculum, which included various topics such as prevention of HIV and sexually transmitted infections (STIs), sexual diversity, and bodily autonomy—to empower girls and young women to make safe decisions without facing coercion or violence. In 2020-2021, a total of 1517 teachers were also trained using certified courses to improve their skills on the delivery of CSE in schools.

In 2020-2021, the Joint Team supported the Ministry of Health to establish new comprehensive adolescent centres in Cojedes, Maracay, and Valencia cities; and upgrade and equip existing centres in Caracas, Charallave, Maracaibo, and Soledad. As a result of this support, 68 centres are now able to offer counselling services on HIV and sexual and reproductive health (SRH) to adolescents in Venezuela. A total of 565 adolescents were also supported to join peer groups to promote the use of comprehensive HIV and sexual and reproductive health services among vulnerable adolescents.

Asociación de Mujeres por el Bienestar y la Asistencia Recíproca (AMBAR)—a nongovernmental organization working on women equality and welfare received technical and financial support, including personal protective equipment and HIV/syphilis testing kits, to conduct a study on the impacts of COVID-19 pandemic on the health and working conditions of 214 female sex workers in Caracas. The report revealed a 3.6% HIV and 16% syphilis prevalence among the female sex workers aged under 25 years who participated in the study. It also highlighted that 17% of these female sex workers started sex work to support their livelihood during the pandemic.

### **GENDER INEQUALITIES AND GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE**

The Joint Team supported the implementation of information campaigns, including workshops and dissemination of flyers on gender-based violence and related services sensitizing 62 506 people in priority cities and communities around the Colombian border with high migratory movement. A total of 6783 individuals accessed gender-based violence services while 531 adolescent girls and women participated in various empowerment programmes to improve their knowledge and decision making around their sexuality and uptake and consistent use of condoms and contraceptives. Dignity kits were also distributed to 24 144 women during these events. Additionally, technical assistance was provided to train 2735 workers from public and humanitarian institutions to strengthen their understanding on prevention and management of gender-based violence cases.

### INVESTMENT AND EFFICIENCY

As a result of technical support, more than US\$ 1.9 million was mobilized from the Global Fund COVID-19 Response Mechanism to support the COVID-19 response in Venezuela. The funds were used to procure personal protective equipment and other essential commodities to overcome the impacts of the pandemic and ensure the continuity of HIV and other critical health services during the pandemic.

### CONTRIBUTION TO THE INTEGRATED SDG AGENDA

The Joint Team organized several public dialogues with various vulnerable populations, including people living with HIV, people from the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) community, and indigenous people to identify and address their needs in line with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the principle of leaving no one behind. Key findings and recommendations from the dialogues will inform the development of the new United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (UNSDCF) 2023-2026.

In 2020-2021, the Joint Team actively supported the work of civil society organizations, including through the procurement of antiretroviral medicines and the provision of personal protective equipment for their protection from COVID-19. Technical assistance and capacity building from the Joint Team also strengthened community-led monitoring of the HIV response.

The Ministry of Health was supported for the development of the National Protocol on the Clinical Management of Sexual Violence, which emphasizes a human rights approach to the delivery of sexual and gender-based violence services. The Joint Team also trained 152 primary healthcare workers and hospital staff to support the implementation of the new protocol in pilot hospitals, a direct contribution towards SDG 5 (Gender Equality).

### CHALLENGES AND LESSONS LEARNED

Despite the remarkable advances made in the HIV response, Venezuela remains far from ending the AIDS and tuberculosis pandemics by 2030. Economic and structural challenges continue to impede progress toward the Fast-Track and global tuberculosis targets. Lessons learned underscore the need to intensify technical and financial support to strengthen institutional capacity, scale up HIV and tuberculosis services and ensure the sustainability of the national HIV and tuberculosis response.

The economic predicament in Venezuela presented significant challenges, including stockout of medicines and shortage of commodities for the national HIV response. It also worsened sexual and gender-based, and physical violence against children and women. Experiences showed the need for creating buffer stock of HIV-related medicines and commodities to improve the quality and continuity of HIV services in the country. It is also critical to intensify advocacy to increase donor funding and improve the working conditions and capacity of healthcare providers to support effective implementation of HIV services and programmes during the economic crisis.

The COVID-19 pandemic prevention measures, including restriction of air and sea transportation further exacerbated shortages of antiretroviral treatment and HIV rapid test kits disrupting HIV service delivery in the country. The pandemic-related social restrictions also impacted programme implementation, including face-to-face training and supervision support. Lessons learned underscored the effectiveness of virtual training in strengthening the capacity of healthcare providers to scale up various services, including HIV/syphilis rapid testing services.

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