



POSITION PAPER

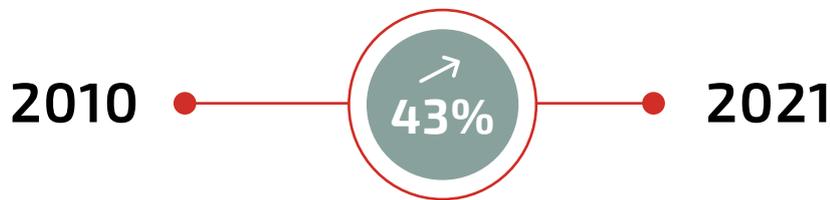
**ONLY EQUALITY
AND COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT
CAN HELP TO OVERCOME
THE DUAL PANDEMIC
OF HIV AND COVID-19**



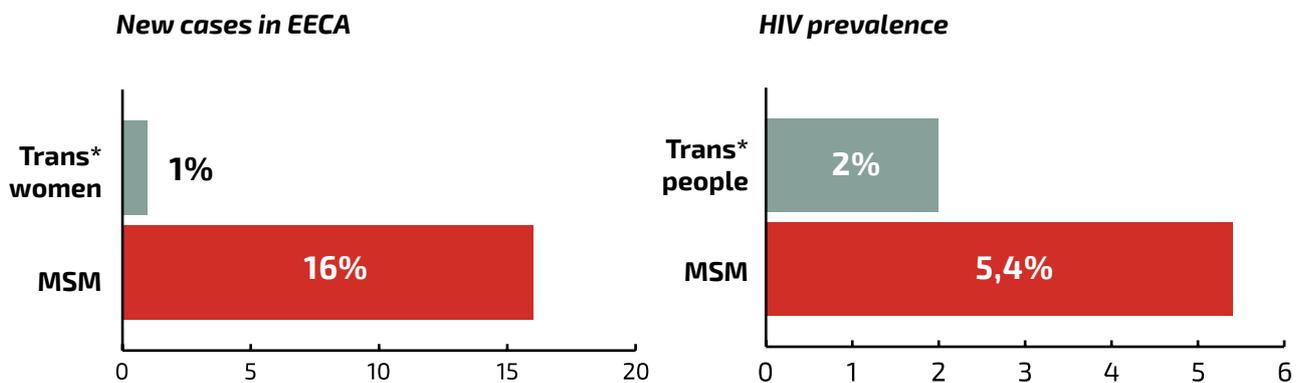


since the first cases of HIV were identified and the HIV epidemic and pandemic¹ began to take hold

Unfortunately, we are now forced to note that progress towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, in particular the goal to end the AIDS epidemic by 2030², has slowed dramatically³. This is primarily due to another new pandemic, COVID-19, which is drawing off a huge amount of resources, and threatens to reverse gains made in the global HIV response.



In Eastern Europe and Central Asia (EECA), for example, the number of new HIV cases continues to grow. According to UNAIDS, the number of new infections in the region in 2021 increased by 43% compared to 2010. This is the highest increase of any region in the world.



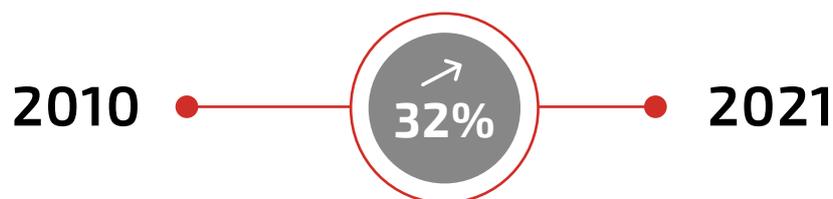
16% of new cases in EECA are among MSM and 1% among trans* women. HIV prevalence among MSM averages 5.4% in the region and almost 2% among trans* people⁴.

¹ Pandemic (pandemia; from the Greek for all people in general) is an unusually strong epidemic that spreads across countries and continents, (Great Medical Encyclopedia).

² Sustainable Development Goals <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/ru/health/>

³ Regional Progress, Challenges and Priorities: Eastern Europe and Central Asia and Latin America and the Caribbean. 66th Partnership Forums of the Global Fund. Presentation. https://www.theglobalfund.org/media/11123/partnershipforum_global-progress-challenges-priorities-eeca-lac_report_en.pdf

⁴ UNAIDS epidemiological estimates, 2021 <https://aidsinfo.unaids.org/>



At the same time, the coverage of antiretroviral therapy (ART) in EECA remains among the lowest in the world — only about half of people living with HIV in the region receive ART. It is not surprising that against this background, the number of AIDS-related deaths has increased by 32% compared to 2010⁴.

The COVID-19 pandemic, ongoing for more than a year and a half, has severely reduced the availability of HIV services, especially for key populations. The diversion of financial, human and technical resources from health systems to combat the COVID-19 pandemic, the overburdening and repurposing of health facilities, shortages of health workers, and quarantine restrictions, including travel bans, all present new barriers to achieving the goal of ending the AIDS epidemic³.

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted and continues to exacerbate the profound inequalities faced by the most vulnerable groups in accessing essential services, including health care. Members of LGBT communities are among those most affected in this regard. For example, access to health services for carrying out and maintaining transgender transition (including hormone replacement therapy) has been categorized as «secondary» since the COVID-19 pandemic, severely limiting the right of trans* people to receive needed qualified care⁵.

HIV prevention and testing services have become much less accessible, due to the fact that they are also not classified as elements of critical infrastructure in the development of the response to COVID-19. It has not been possible to maintain the coverage of key populations at prior levels, even despite the rapid response of HIV-service providers and the move of some services to a remote or online format⁶.

Domestic violence and gender-based violence have increased pervasively during times of restriction and forced isolation, which has affected cisgender and trans* women to a great extent. 70% of the violence experienced by LGBT people occurs within families⁷. Trans* people, gays, and lesbians, who often do not have other housing options, are forced to isolate themselves in the same space as their abusers. Existing shelters and safe spaces, which were limited even before, are not able to help all those now in need.

³ Regional Progress, Challenges and Priorities: Eastern Europe and Central Asia and Latin America and the Caribbean. 66th Partnership Forums of the Global Fund. Presentation. https://www.theglobalfund.org/media/11123/partnershipforum_global-progress-challenges-priorities-eeca-lac_report_en.pdf

⁴ UNAIDS epidemiological estimates, 2021 <https://aidsinfo.unaids.org/>

⁵ Boglarka Fedorko, Anwar Ogrm, and Sanjar Kurmanov (2021) Impact assessment: COVID-19 and trans people in Europe and Central Asia. TGEU. <https://tgeu.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/impact-assessment-covid19-and-trans-people-in-europe-and-central-asia.pdf>.

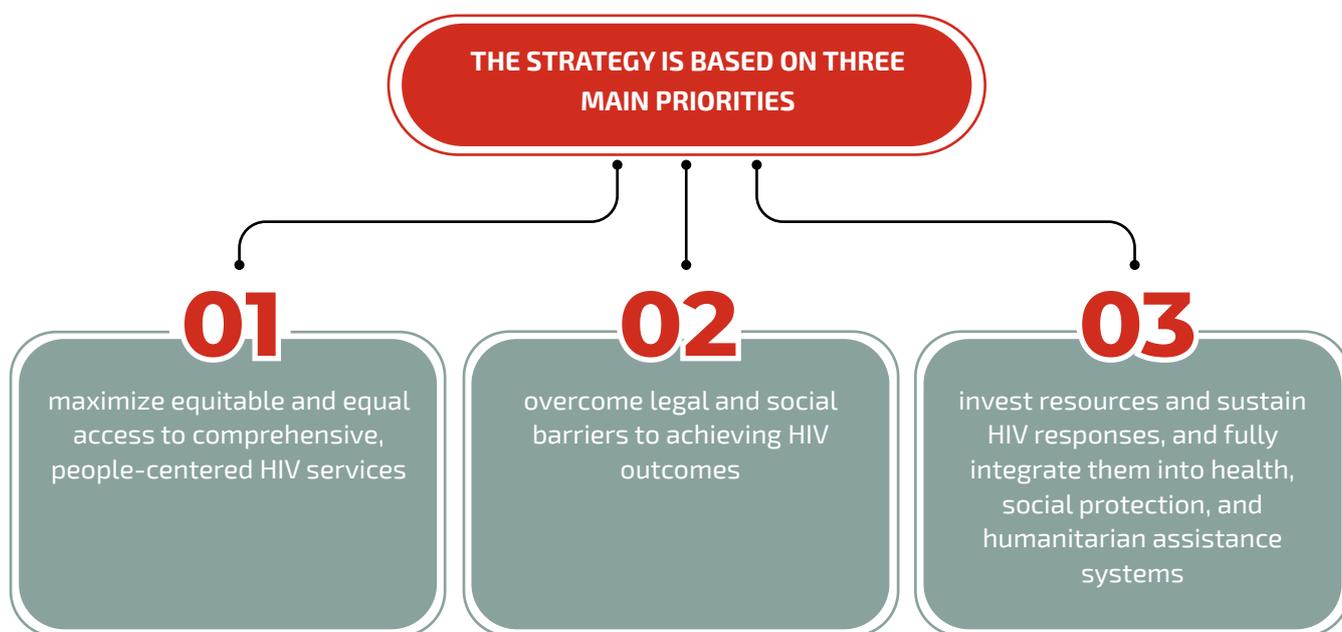
⁶ Preventing HIV Infection in the times of a new pandemic. A synthesis report on program disruption and adaptation during the COVID-19 pandemic. Global HIV Prevention Coalition https://www.unaids.org/sites/default/files/media_asset/Status%20of%20HIV%20Prevention%20Services%20in%20the%20Time%20of%20COVID-19_web.pdf

⁷ <https://eeca.unfpa.org/en/news/kyrgyzstans-lgbtqi-community-risks-escalate-under-covid-19-pandemic>

Socioeconomic inequality has become more acute. For example, an assessment of the impact of COVID-19 on trans* people in Europe and Central Asia found that isolation, self-isolation, and travel restrictions prevent trans* people from earning money to meet even basic needs. It is no secret that a large proportion of trans* women are involved in sex work, which was hit very hard during the pandemic, depriving sex workers of even a minimal income. Nearly half of the organizations providing support to trans* people that took part in the assessment reported having been forced to shift their focus entirely to providing their clients with basic assistance, such as food, medication, and personal protective equipment⁵.

Against the backdrop of this situation, we believe that eliminating all forms of inequality is what should help overcome the burden of the dual pandemic and give a new impetus to achieving the goals of eradicating AIDS by 2030.

The new Global AIDS Strategy 2021-2026 «End Inequality. End AIDS»⁸, aims to do just that, and places human rights, gender equality and dignity, and the elimination of all forms of stigma and discrimination at the core of the fight against HIV.



⁸ Global AIDS Strategy 2021 – 2026. End Inequalities. End AIDS. <https://www.unaids.org/en/resources/documents/2021/2021-2026-global-AIDS-strategy>

ECOM CALLS ON PARTNERS AND COMMUNITIES TO SUPPORT THE NEW GLOBAL STRATEGY, FOR WHICH IT IS NECESSARY TO:

-  Be guided by human rights and take into account the needs and demands of LGBT people in planning, implementing, providing access to, and evaluating national and regional HIV programs;
-  Maximize community involvement in restoring progress toward the global goal of ending HIV/AIDS by 2030, and ensure the sustainable engagement of the LGBT community with health, social protection, and humanitarian support systems;
-  Expand and maintain comprehensive HIV services even during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, and provide other necessary health services for LGBT people most affected by the pandemic (trans* people, sex workers, refugees and migrants, young and elderly LGBT people, and people with disabilities);
-  Expand assistance programs for LGBT people in crisis and/or facing violence, including shelters/safe spaces for gay and trans* people, crisis counseling, legal assistance, provision of basic necessities (food, medical supplies, personal protective equipment) for those without adequate means of subsistence, and assistance in finding employment;
-  Include representatives of the LGBT community in the development and implementation of crisis response activities, and the COVID-19 pandemic response and recovery plan.

