



European  
AIDS Treatment  
Group

Rapid Assessment Bulletin  
EATG COVID-19  
Community Response  
Project



Issue 6 | 27 January 2021

## CONTENTS

1. Overview	2
2. The situation now: 11 months of the COVID-19 experience	3
3. Looking to 2021: supporting HIV communities	3
Acknowledgements	4
Key selected issues and required stakeholder actions	5
Appendix: COVID-19 Community Response project main activities 2020	10

*A chilling pattern of inequity shapes the burden of COVID-19 and HIV. The adverse effects of each disease are exacerbated by social and economic disparities and disproportionately affect poor and marginalised people—young women and girls in particular.<sup>1</sup>*

## 1. Overview

Since March 2020, EATG has documented challenges encountered by people living with and affected by HIV with the disruption caused by the SARS-COV-2 outbreaks, as well as beneficial community and health sector interventions to mitigate COVID-19's harm for people affected by HIV. This bulletin draws the project to a close by looking to 2021 and beyond. Which lessons learned from 2020 can be taken forward? What interventions introduced to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 have proven their worth and should be continued? How can EATG and other European organisations support the community of people affected by HIV, and their organisations, to ensure services and support are available and sufficient?

---

<sup>1</sup> Editorial (2020). Maintaining the HIV response in a world shaped by COVID-19. Lancet 396(10264): 1703. Released November 2020. Available here: [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(20\)32526-5/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(20)32526-5/fulltext) (Accessed December 2020)

## 2. The situation now: 11 months of the COVID-19 experience

The European region comprises 51 countries, with a great variety in the COVID-19 experience. However, some trends are emerging, though with differing degrees of intensity.

A **small survey of EATG members undertaken at the end of November 2020** for this bulletin highlights a number of ongoing issues currently facing people and organisations:

- A sense of disconnect, and HIV being perceived as a lower priority in health systems.
- Key and vulnerable populations remain disproportionately affected by the pandemic.
- Confusion around COVID-19 control measures and inability to make plans (including health consultations) pose significant threat to physical and mental health.
- Difficulties obtaining tests, including for HIV viral load, and liver function.
- Continuing reduced access to PrEP.
- For those people living with HIV and who have also recovered from COVID-19, a desire to know of any long-term impact
- The mental health of people affected by HIV remains a significant personal morbidity – stress and anxiety are both increased with the collateral risk of increased substance-use. There is a perception of ‘intensity’.
- Pressure on organisation’s staff – working from home means it’s more difficult to separate from work activities, and sustainability of community-based organisation is under threat, with some feeling “stranded”. There is a lack of personal space for staff and significant challenges providing all support online. For one Central European EATG member, “we all miss the energy of face-to-face meetings”.

Several EATG members noted that some of the innovation in service delivery that emerged to meet the challenge of COVID-19 **could be beneficial to maintain in the long-term**. These include, for instance, use of telemedicines, increasing access to self- and rapid testing, the use of remote support reaching people geographically beyond an organisation’s usual catchment area or training non-medical or nursing staff to undertake testing and screening. But some transformation will require policy change, investment and affordability to be considered (e.g., self-test kits).

## 3. Looking to 2021: supporting HIV communities

Based on the outcomes of EATG’s COVID-19 project, the following issues should be highlighted in planning for 2021 and beyond:

- Increase information sharing and networking within and beyond communities

affected by HIV. This is especially vital for community-based organisations as they adapt workplans/patterns of working to address emerging issues and prepare funding applications.

- Share updated information on COVID-19 as it emerges, as well as related care issues, progress in research and development, challenges to care, and issues around vaccine access.
- Create space for HIV in health policy and health care systems, by pushing a strong narrative and linking with social policy, the economic cost of inaction, and the consequences of losing focus on HIV prevention, care, and treatment.
- Prioritise anxiety reduction and prevent the development of serious mental health disorders through promoting (as appropriate) self-help tools.
- Provide mental health support to organisations themselves – the risk of COVID-19 ‘burnout’ is high. CBOs require support caring for their own staff and volunteers.

## Acknowledgements

Now the EATG COVID-19 Community Response Project is coming to a close, it’s important to acknowledge and thank the many people who contributed to the project’s reports, events, interviews, and surveys during 2020. In particular, thanks go to:

- The EATG Office for logistical support and document processing.
- The EATG COVID 19 Community Response project task group for expert advice and guidance.
- Interview and survey respondents for giving up their time to share their perceptions and insights.
- Webinar presenters for providing important grounded and informed information, personal experiences, and recommendations.

Finally, thanks to ViiV for providing funding to support the EATG COVID-19 Community Response Project

## Key selected issues and required stakeholder actions

This grid includes **four domains for action**:

1. Personal
2. Community-based organisations (CBOs)
3. Advocacy
4. Health

PERSONAL						
KEY ISSUE	Immediate action		Short- medium-term action		Long term planning	
	Stakeholder	Action	Stakeholder	Action	Stakeholder	Action
Mental health [isolation, increased stress, anxiety around COVID-19 and lack of access to support and services]	NGO/CBO	Continue contact and ensure psychological support is available. Collaboration with health care providers for referral systems [leave no one behind].	NGO/CBO	Build mental health support into all project planning following needs assessment.	NGO/CBO	Monitor long term mental health issues post-COVID-19 and assume long term impact for some PLHIV.
	Public sector [govt.]	Funding support for additional counselling services in collaboration with health and community services. Recognise HIV related support and harm reduction services as part of the social protection system.	Public sector	Liaise with community and health and social sectors to provide sustainable integrated support systems for mental health.	Public sector	Monitor effectiveness of interventions and liaise with other stakeholders to track the impact of mental health and amend strategies as required.
	Medical sector/ health care providers	Include mental health support in HIV care into all interventions. Collaborate with community-based services. Ensure person-centred care in all interactions. Monitor and report on evolution of mental health of patients and vulnerable communities	Medical sector/ health care providers	Ensure mental health is integrated into all care pathways. Collaborate with community service providers.	Medical sector/ health care providers	Monitor extent of mental health issues post-COVID-19 and accommodate interventions into care pathways.

<b>Socioeconomic challenges [increased poverty, job insecurity]</b>	<i>NGO/CBO</i>	Liaise with other stakeholders to identify immediate need and promote joined-up working/cross-sectoral partnership.	<i>NGO/CBO</i>	Include socioeconomic factors into project planning and grant applications.	<i>NGO/CBO</i>	Monitor impact of socioeconomic issues on quality of life and as barriers to effective HIV care delivery and support.
	<i>Public sector [govt.]</i>	Expand social services to meet additional needs and ensure services are stigma-free.	<i>Public sector</i>	Work with other stakeholders to address post-COVID-19 issues and emerging threats to day-to-day living.	<i>Public sector</i>	Monitor long-term impact of COVID-19 on wellbeing of people affected by HIV.  Plan strategically to address personal economic crises.  As more people may require additional support, provide capacity building to ensure interventions are stigma-free and HIV-aware in consultation with the community.

COMMUNITY BASED ORGANISATIONS						
KEY ISSUE	Immediate action		Short- medium-term action		Long term planning	
	Stakeholder	Action	Stakeholder	Action	Stakeholder	Action
<b>CBOs [services and sustainability]</b>	<i>NGO/CBO</i>	Amend donor applications as needed – ensure support for CBO workers is maintained so that services are maintained.  Organise remote/online support and maintain essential face-to-face services where and when relevant.	<i>NGO/CBO</i>	Submit new proposals including proven benefits of some interventions from 2020 [include community in planning].	<i>NGO/CBO</i>	Monitor effectiveness of new working patterns and methods of support and interventions. Work closely with other stakeholders in planning and delivery of projects.
	<i>Donors/funders</i>	Liaise with CBOs as they amend workplans and allow immediate reallocation of funding.	<i>Donors/funders</i>	Funding flexibility to meet demands of new workplans.	<i>Donors/funders</i>	Ensure calls for applications reflect new CBO working patterns and the needs of the community.

Advocacy						
KEY ISSUE	Immediate action		Short- medium-term action		Long term planning	
	Stakeholder	Action	Stakeholder	Action	Stakeholder	Action
Community engagement in local health policy dialogue	NGO/CBO	Advocate for information clarity and to maintain a focus on HIV and comorbidities. Engage in community research. Advocacy for access to COVID 19 vaccines to all that present specific need	NGO/CBO	Plan for strategic policy advocacy to promote the voice of the community at the national level.	NGO/CBO	Monitor and gather evidence that the community voice is being heard and that advocates are present at key decision-making events [not just COVID-19-related].
	Public sector [govt.]	Liaise with CBOs to ensure messaging is accurate and current [about HIV, key populations, and COVID-19]	Public sector	Engage with communities in health policymaking and programming	Public sector	Include community representatives in health-related decisions and developing guidelines.
	Medical sector/ health care providers	Continue collaboration with CBOs	Medical sector/ health care providers	Promote messaging in health care settings that provides accurate and current information reflecting the needs of communities affected by HIV.	Medical sector/ health care providers	Liaise strategically with the community and engage them in core health-related decision-making post-COVID-19.
	Donors/funders	Donors allow flexibility in current project workplans allowing for increased emphasis on advocacy and local/national government engagement.	Donors/funders	Donors consider funding advocacy activities to bring the community to the forefront of national level decision making on health [especially COVID-19]	Donors/funders	Donors promote and fund activities promoting long term advocacy maintaining the prominence of HIV and related issues in national and regional agenda.

Health						
KEY ISSUE	Immediate action		Short- medium-term action		Long term planning	
	Stakeholder	Action	Stakeholder	Action	Stakeholder	Action
<b>Access to and continuity of care [consultations for HIV and other conditions, obtaining ARVs, OST, PrEP]</b>	<i>NGO/CBO</i>	Continue innovative methods of providing treatment (e.g., home delivery, expansion of community pharmacies). Support empowerment for digital tools.	<i>NGO/CBO</i>	Make plans to address the national situation and the community needs to sustain treatment access.	<i>NGO/CBO</i>	Monitor, with other stakeholders, treatment access post-COVID-19 and plan accordingly to maintain alternative methods of treatment provision.
	<i>Public sector [govt.]</i>	Enable medicines delivery at local pharmacies or home delivery to ensure supply and reduce need for travel. Maintain stocks [pharma] and adequate provision of PPE. Expand use of e-Prescriptions. Reimbursement /tariffication for remote consultations.	<i>Public sector</i>	Plan for more decentralisation of treatment provision away from main hospital centres.	<i>Public sector [govt.]</i>	Monitor, with other stakeholders, treatment access post-COVID-19 and plan for robust pharmacy infrastructure.
	<i>Medical sector/ health care providers</i>	Maintain alternative treatment provision [with CBOs]. Diversify as needed. Prevent loss of follow up for treatment and PrEP. Restart PrEP programmes as soon as possible. Integrate self-testing/sampling in programmes. Design care pathways that acknowledge the 'human' component of care delivery and in collaboration with the community.	<i>Medical sector/ health care providers</i>	Integrate remote consultations with face to face when this is safe. Consult the community to meet their requests [more may wish for remote consultations].	<i>Medical sector/ health care providers</i>	Monitor, with other stakeholders, treatment access post-COVID-19, and the long term-benefits or challenges with remote consultations. Flexibility in providing face to face/remote consultations.
	<i>Private [industry]</i>	Maintain stocks [pharma] and adequate provision of PPE.	<i>Private [industry]</i>	Work with national governments and community groups to ensure smooth delivery and availability of medication and PPE.		
<b>Testing [lack of access to HIV and other tests]</b>	<i>NGO/CBO</i>	Expand capacity for supporting community self-testing and rapid testing and counselling. Integrate COVID-19 into a 'package' of available tests.	<i>NGO/CBO</i>	Plan for increased access to self-testing and build into funding applications. Train community and peer workers.	<i>NGO/CBO</i>	Monitor uptake and effectiveness of self-testing and rapid testing and build into project planning and grant applications.
	<i>Public sector</i>	Remove regulatory barriers to testing beyond	<i>Public sector</i>	Ensure access to screening	<i>Public sector</i>	Ensure access to screening prevention,



	<i>[govt.]</i>	medical settings (rapid/self-testing). Find a way to reduce pricing.		prevention, linkage to care and disease management		linkage to care and disease management
	<i>Medical sector/ health care providers</i>	Promote self-testing and provide capacity building for non-medical/nursing involvement [peer workers]	<i>Medical sector/ health care providers</i>	Continue to promote self-testing and provide capacity building for non-medical/nursing involvement [peer workers]	<i>Medical sector/ health care providers</i>	Plan strategically for an expanded community testing system and sustainable expansion of skilled personnel.
	<i>Private [industry]</i>	Address pricing and self-test availability.	<i>Private [industry]</i>	Work with other stakeholders to expand self-testing in the community. Explore suitability of combination test Link to counselling and support in self-test leaflets. Engage with community service providers in R&D. Sustain availability of tools for viral load monitoring. Work on increased affordability of tools.	<i>Private [industry] [Donors/funders]</i>	Plan strategically to support increased capacity for community testing in the long term.
<b>Digital health tools</b>	<i>Developers of solution</i>	Engage with users in co-design and ensure data security by design.	<i>Developers of solution</i>	Engage with users in co-design and ensure data security by design. Liaise with other sectors to ensure platforms and tools remain fit for purpose.	<i>Developers of solution</i>	Liaise with other sectors to ensure platforms and tools remain fit for purpose.
	<i>Public sector &amp; CBO</i>	Address urgently the digital divide. Monitor and take immediate action to protect data. Improve secure health data portability. Assess what worked and what has not.	<i>Public sector &amp; CBO</i>	Develop guidelines and policies to maximise digital access. Develop long-term data protection guidelines and policies. Improve secure health data portability.	<i>Public sector &amp; CBO</i>	Monitor uptake and user experience. Plan to expand reach and consider alternatives for those facing challenges to digital access.

## Appendix: COVID-19 Community Response project main activities 2020

<https://linktr.ee/eatgCovid19>

EATG's **Statements** on COVID-19 pandemic. See [here](#) (26/3/2020) and [here](#) (8/7/2020)  
Public Facebook group '[HIV/co-infections & COVID-19 Resources](#)' to share evidence-based information.

**Rapid Assessment Reports** on COVID-19 crisis' impact on PLHIV and on communities most affected by HIV.

English:

<https://bit.ly/eatgra1>

<https://bit.ly/eatgra2>

<https://bit.ly/eatgra3>

<https://bit.ly/eatgra4>

<https://bit.ly/eatgra5>

<https://bit.ly/eatgra6>

Russian:

<https://bit.ly/eatgra1rus>

<https://bit.ly/eatgra2rus>

<https://bit.ly/eatgra3rus>

<https://bit.ly/eatgra4rus>

<https://bit.ly/eatgra5rus>

<https://bit.ly/eatgra6rus>

COVID-19 **E-Meetings**: See [here](#)

*EATG COVID-19 Community Response project has been independently developed by EATG and is supported by the ViiV Healthcare Positive Action Programme. EATG acknowledges that the sponsor had no control or input into the structure or content of the project.*

### About the European AIDS Treatment Group:

The European AIDS Treatment Group (EATG) is a patient-led NGO that advocates for the rights and interests of people living with or affected by HIV/AIDS and related co-infections within the WHO Europe region. Founded in 1992, the EATG is a network of more than 180 nationally-based members from 47 countries in Europe. Our members are PLHIV and representatives of different communities affected by HIV/AIDS and co-infections. EATG represents the diversity of more than 2.3 million people living with HIV (PLHIV) in Europe as well as those affected by HIV/AIDS and co-infections. For more information, please visit [www.eatg.org](http://www.eatg.org)