



Message from
DR AHMED AL-MANDHARI
REGIONAL DIRECTOR
WHO EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN REGION



on the occasion of
WORLD AIDS DAY
1 December 2020



Today is World AIDS Day 2020. This was intended to be a milestone year for achieving the global 90-90-90 targets. The aim was to ensure that by 2020, 90% of people living with HIV knew their status, 90% of people with diagnosed HIV infection received treatment, and 90% of those receiving treatment were virally suppressed.

However, we were already behind on those global targets, and then came the COVID-19 pandemic, which has caused widespread disruption and threatens to reverse a lot of gains made in health and other developmental areas.

While countries have worked tirelessly to respond to COVID-19, other essential health services have been affected, including HIV prevention, diagnosis and treatment. A modelling group convened by WHO and UNAIDS estimated that a six-month disruption of antiretroviral therapy could lead to more than 500 000 extra deaths from AIDS-related illnesses in sub-Saharan Africa in 2020–2021.

In our Region, COVID-19 has come at a critical time for the HIV epidemic. There are an estimated 420 000 people living with HIV (PLHIV) and the epidemic is evolving on an unprecedented scale. In 2019 alone, 44 000 new HIV infections occurred in the Region – a 47% increase compared to the baseline year of 2010. Only one third of PLHIV in the Region have been diagnosed and only 24% are accessing antiretroviral therapy. This difficult situation has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Many countries have reported disruption to services. With lockdown measures, it became difficult for PLHIV to get to the health facilities, for outreach workers to reach out to key populations and for health services to cope with COVID-19 alongside other diseases. Some countries ran out of stocks of antiretroviral medicines due to the disruption of air cargo and a global decrease in manufacturing of medicines. Moreover, the HIV services workforce has been depleted, either due to redeployment in the COVID-19 response or, unfortunately, COVID-19 infection. This has put many PLHIV at risk of not receiving their life-saving medications and services on time.

But the pandemic has also offered an opportunity to introduce innovations such as multi-month dispensing and courier distribution of medicines, and virtual support groups and consultations with patients. Partnership with civil society has been key in ensuring continued engagement with HIV service clients, maintaining continuity of their services and supporting their adherence during this difficult time. On behalf of WHO, let me take this opportunity to salute civil society organizations for their longstanding role in empowering PLHIV and for their crucial work in these unprecedented times.

Notwithstanding these success stories, the challenges and disruption have revealed a lack of resilience in our health systems, including HIV programmes. COVID-19 will not be the last pandemic the world experiences, and we should learn lessons from it so that we are better prepared in future.

For this reason, our regional theme for World AIDS Day 2020 is “Resilience of HIV services”. Our goal is to help countries build stronger, more networked and more integrated HIV health services which remain strong when faced with emergencies. This year, we should all listen to the voices of PLHIV and their reflections on the services they received during this emergency. Their side of the story matters. Through their experiences we can learn what makes a service well adapted to its users.

Everyone has the right to the highest attainable health standard, and preoccupation with an emergency should not deter us from maintaining essential health services for those who need them. We need to work hand in hand to make our services strong and unceasing, including in exceptional times, to reach universal health coverage and end AIDS.

I call upon our Member States to continue the work achieved so far, learn the lessons and make their health systems more resilient. For our part, I commit WHO to continue supporting the efforts of Member States, including civil society organizations and PLHIV, to maintain essential health services and strengthen health systems to increase their resilience.

#ResilientHIVservices