

Project information

Project title

NEED TITLE: Assessment and Validation of the progress towards achievement of the Elimination Initiative targets for Mother to Child Transmission with a focus on **Barbados and the Eastern Caribbean**

Grant country

Caribbean with a special focus on Barbados and the Eastern Caribbean Countries

The aim of the MAC AIDS funded project “Elimination of mother-to-child transmission of HIV and Congenital Syphilis in the Caribbean” (February 27, 2012 – February 26, 2013) that is currently being implemented is to support the strengthening and expansion of services and programs to achieve the goal of elimination of mother-to-child transmission of HIV and congenital syphilis. The specific activities of the program are:

1. The development of workplans and implementation plan in certain countries in the Caribbean.
2. Advocacy for Caribbean commitment for the achievement of the Elimination Initiative in the Pan-Caribbean

Date awarded

27 February 2012

Brief program description:

Mother-to-child transmission (MTCT) of HIV constitutes a significant Public Health challenge in the Caribbean. Currently an estimated 10% of the new HIV infections in the Caribbean are transmitted vertically. During pregnancy, HIV contributes to adverse outcomes including maternal death and stillbirth. In addition, HIV infection creates a life-long chronic condition that potentially shortens the life expectancy and contributes to substantial human, psycho-social and economic costs. A significant number of countries in the Caribbean – especially the members of the Organization of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS) - may have achieved or are close to achieving the elimination targets for the prevention of mother to child transmission; however the results still need to be validated. Efforts need to be scaled up to operationalize strategies and plans, especially in those countries that have the highest burden. The objectives of this program, that is focusing on the OECS and Barbados are: 1. To develop an operational workplan for EI for 2013 to 2015 in the context of the PAHO Caribbean Framework; and 2. To Support the validation assessments in OECS countries to further track progress to the achievement of the Elimination Initiative goals.

Demographics

Population/Community description:

MTCT of HIV constitutes an estimated 8-10% of all transmission in the region in the absence of interventions. As a result, the primary target population for this proposal are pregnant women and persons of reproductive age. The estimated HIV prevalence among women aged 15-24 years is 2-3 times higher than among males. Around 800,000 live births take place in the Caribbean each year, with an estimated HIV prevalence among pregnant women of 1% with approximately 8,000 infants exposed to HIV each year. Without intervention, estimated 2,200-3,000 children will be born with HIV infection in the Caribbean each year. PAHO and UNICEF have developed strategies to advance the elimination of MTCT of HIV and congenital syphilis which have been endorsed by the Ministers of Health of the Caribbean. This will contribute to the reduction of maternal and neonatal morbidity and mortality, improvement of sexual and reproductive health, and the achievement of national and regional targets.

Globally, data is showing that women are at increased risk of HIV infection. In the Caribbean in particular, because of the shift in the epidemic's transmission from homosexual to heterosexual contact as the primary mode of transmission, women and young girls are especially vulnerable due to high mobility, multiple partnering, lower social and economic factors and gender-based violence. Elimination is a Public Health goal and is defined as reduction of case transmission to a predetermined very low level, below Public Health significance. PMTCT of HIV intervention programs have been introduced in all Caribbean countries, and some countries in the Caribbean may have achieved or are close to achieving the elimination targets for the prevention of MTCT. From current data these include Barbados and the OECS but the results still need to be validated or remaining gaps identified for intervention. The Caribbean (especially the OECS) may be a region where Elimination may be first realized.

HIV incidence and prevalence:

UNAIDS reports that there is currently an estimated 8-10% of the new HIV infections in the Caribbean are mother-to-child transmissions. HIV seropositivity reported in pregnant women in most of the Caribbean countries is between 1 to 2%, with higher prevalence in Haiti and The Bahamas. Several Caribbean countries have however reported promising progress in access to services to prevent mother-to-child transmission of HIV over the past years, but major gaps remain within and between countries. Most countries reported significant increases in the coverage of HIV screening of pregnant women, ranging from 50% to 93% (Universal Access, 2009). The regional coverage of ARV for PMTCT is estimated at 52% (Universal Access, 2009) However, a subset of countries included in this application (Barbados and the Eastern Caribbean) demonstrate higher uptake of HIV testing in pregnant women – over 80% - and successful interventions in pregnant women and reduction in the occurrence of MTCT of HIV.

Project detail

Program activities description:

1. **High level meeting of Technical Working Group (TWG) and the Chief Medical Officers (CMOs on the Elimination Initiative (EI)).** The TWG was convened in the Caribbean and has had one meeting with CMOs. Through this activity, an operational plan for EI 2013-2015 in the context of the PAHO Caribbean Framework will be developed. It will also be the opportunity for continued high-level advocacy and communication, assessment of specific needs of countries for Technical Cooperation (related to interventions to reduce existing programmatic gaps) with a focus on programmatic assessment of the EI certification validation exercises, discussions on strategies for community involvement and outline of Surveillance and Strategic Information policies. In addition, the meeting will provide an opportunity for discussion of the implications of the WHO recent introduction of the B+ option with the continued use of HAART following the delivery of the baby (benefitting the woman, the baby and the partner).
2. **Certification validation exercises/assessments in the 6 independent OECS countries.** This includes:
 - Follow-up in-country validation exercise in the OECS (Except Saint Lucia) – 5 days
 - In-country consultations (1 day). Funding for in-country follow-up is requested to visit at least 4 countries to identify the progress made and provide technical support
3. **Program Administration:** Costs related to the administration of the Grant as well as the indirect costs charged by the Organization as per its regulations will be charged to the project.

Key objectives:

To develop an operational workplan for Elimination Initiative for 2013 to 2015 in the context of the PAHO HIV Caribbean Framework 2013-2015

Many documents, including tools and guidelines have been developed to support country implementation and circulated in country. These include Clinical Guidelines (in 3 languages), the Regional Monitoring Guide, a Costing Tool, and in development is a Field Guide. To realize the gains and document success there are some critical next steps which include strengthening integration of the Elimination Initiative into maternal, newborn and child health (MNCH) and to enhance linkages with sexual and reproductive health (SRH).

The operational plan developed should include activities for the expansion of testing for all pregnant women and their partners by increasing access to point of care testing for HIV and syphilis is required for timely identification of persons who require the interventions to reduce transmission to their offsprings accompanied by enhanced community awareness and participation. The TWG and CMO attending this meeting will provide guidance in the development of the plan in addition to providing consensus on key strategies being adopted.

1. **To Support the validation assessments in countries to further track progress to the achievement of the Elimination Initiative goals.**

Assessment and validation of the progress toward eliminating mother –to-child transmission will certify that countries have met the regional goals of the elimination initiative. A protocol for the assessment and validation of the progress towards achievement of the Elimination Initiative targets by countries has been developed and piloted in St. Lucia but must be completed. The process must also be conducted and completed in the other Eastern Caribbean countries. This funding will contribute to the validation exercises in Barbados and the OECS (Antigua & Barbuda, Dominica, Grenada, St. Lucia, St. Kitts & Nevis, and St. Vincent & the Grenadines).

In the Caribbean PAHO provides technical cooperation to the countries through five flagships. These flagships are: (i) Elimination of mother-to-child transmission of HIV and congenital syphilis; (ii) optimizing HIV diagnosis, treatment and care expansion and preventing ARV drug resistance (Treatment 2.0); (iii) increasing access to HIV/STI prevention, care and treatment services for key populations; (iv) strengthening strategic information and monitoring and surveillance and (v) integrating HIV/STI into primary health care in the context of sustainability. PAHO has a bilateral agreement with countries through the Ministries of Health. Every two years, PAHO in collaboration with the Ministry of Health develops a biennial work programme that outlines key areas for technical cooperation as defined by the territory and in keeping with the strategic objectives of the Ministries.

Under the Elimination Flagship, PAHO through its technical cooperation strategy with countries, will continue working with national authorities, academia, civil society and international partners to assist the countries and territories to achieve their elimination targets by 2015. Efforts need to be scaled up to operationalize strategies and plans, especially in those countries that have the highest burden.

Collaborations and partnerships:

For successful project implementation it is of critical importance that functional partnerships are fostered between public, private, and community-based stakeholders, and development partners. The Caribbean has been a leader in many global public health efforts, including elimination of some vaccine-preventable diseases. In keeping with this thrust, the Caribbean was the first region in the world to launch the Elimination Initiative (2009), aimed at reducing MTCT of HIV and the incidence of congenital syphilis (including stillbirths). The Elimination Initiative (EI) was endorsed by key regional mechanisms, including the Chief Medical Officers and the CARICOM Caucus of Ministers in the Caribbean. In September 2010, the Governments of the Region formalized this endorsement through approval of the Strategy and Plan of Action for Elimination of Mother-to-Child Transmission of HIV and Congenital Syphilis by Resolution 50/15 at the 50th Directing Council Meeting of PAHO Member Countries.

The strategy builds on ongoing efforts to reduce vertical transmission of HIV and syphilis in the Americas, including the regional plan of action for elimination of congenital syphilis endorsed in 1994, and the PMTCT programs developed by all countries in the region.

The broad-based partnership generated around the Elimination Initiative has received global recognition, and in November 2010 the Caribbean received an award for a South-South Cooperation Solution by the Solution Forum on Global Health, hosted by UNDP, ILO and WHO. Since the launch of the Elimination Initiative the region has made significant advancements in implementing the EI, through close collaboration with UN agencies and other key partners such as the CMOs of the Caribbean, PANCAP and CDC.

A sub-regional meeting, as part of the evaluation of the certification activities of program, will also be supported by PAHO's in-kind contributions as well as other sources of funding (Norway International Cooperation).

Currently PAHO's support to country on the Elimination Initiative is limited to resources allocated in the PAHO Biennial Work Programme and is executed through direct Technical Cooperation Requests from the countries to PAHO.

1. Caribbean **operational workplan for EI for 2013 to 2015 in the context of the PAHO Caribbean Framework 2013-2015** developed by the end of the project

2. By the end of this project at least 7 countries would have developed country reports and completed initial assessment for validation of the progress towards the achievement of the Elimination Initiative targets. The implementation of these protocols will assist the countries to achieve the overall targets of the PAHO Elimination Initiative of:

Elimination of Mother to child transmission of HIV

- Transmission of HIV from HIV positive mothers to their infants is reduced to 2% or less, **and**
- Incidence of Mother-to-child Transmission of HIV is reduced to 0.3 cases or less per 1000 live births

Elimination of congenital syphilis

- Incidence of Congenital Syphilis is reduced to 0.5 cases or less, including stillbirths, per 1000 live births

3. Elimination certification validation exercises initiated in Barbados and 6 Eastern Caribbean Countries by September 2013

4. Elimination certification validation exercise completed in St. Lucia by June 2013.