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Special Issue on Efforts to Achieve Third 95: Viral Load Suppression and Response to Mitigate the Impact of COVID-19 in HIV Program

### LINKAGES Nepal Project Viral Load Suppression Efforts

The goal of antiretroviral therapy (ART) is to achieve viral load (VL) suppression in an HIV-positive individual to an undetectable level so the individual lives longer with good health and does not transmit HIV to their sexual partner. VL measurement is a method of monitoring the effectiveness of To achieve this goal, LINKAGES Nepal is supporting the Government of Nepal at every stage of the continuum of HIV care **(Figure 1)** for optimization of VL testing and suppression in the country. The efforts are described below.

ART. Failing to reach VL <1000 copies/ml of blood is considered a failure of ART. All those who achieve a VL level <1000 copies/ml are considered virally suppressed. If VL count reaches below 200 copies/ml of blood, the individual does not transmit HIV during sexual contact, which is undetectable = untransmittable (U=U) evidence proven by PARTNER study along with other studies.<sup>1</sup> The National HIV

Testing and Treatment Guidelines 2020 recommends

routine VL testing at six months and 12 months from ART initiation date and then yearly. LINKAGES Nepal aims to achieve VL suppression among 95 percent of people living with HIV (PLHIV) taking ART as per the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) 95-95-95 targets.



Figure 1. Viral load testing across the continuum of HIV care

#### A) National policy and guidelines development

LINKAGES Nepal participates in the HIV technical working group and HIV laboratory technical committee meetings. The project has contributed to the development of policy and guidelines related to VL testing and suppression as well as VL testing optimization plan, National HIV Testing and Treatment Guidelines, and training packages.

 <sup>1</sup>Rodger, A. J., Cambiano, V., Bruun, T., Vernazza, P., Collins, S., Degen, O., ..., & Raben, D. (2019). Risk of HIV transmission through condomless sex in serodifferent gay couples with the HIV-positive partner taking<br/>suppressive antiretroviral therapy (PARTNER): final results of a multicentre, prospective, observational study. The Lancet, 393(10189), 2428-2438.
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#### B) National optimization of viral load testing

LINKAGES Nepal, in collaboration with National Center for AIDS and STD Control (NCASC) and National Public Health Laboratory (NPHL), organized a VL optimization workshop in February 2020. Participants included government representatives and other stakeholders working in the field of HIV. An action plan was developed that included guality assurance and quality improvement, expansion of VL testing services, optimal use of available VL testing machines and use of GeneXpert machines (normally used for tuberculosis testing) for VL measurements, and introduction of dried blood spot (DBS) for sample collection and transportation. The project is also providing technical assistances forecasting, quantification, and funds for procurement of VL testing reagents.

#### C) Viral load sample collection and transportation

LINKAGES Nepal implementing partners (IPs) agencies coordinate with ART centers, the National Association of People Living with HIV in Nepal (NAP+N), and AIDS Healthcare Foundation (AHF) to organize sample collection for VL testing in the districts. Peer navigators (PNs) and communitybased supporters (CBSs) are mobilized in the community to raise awareness, provide education, and enhance demand generation for VL testing.

## D) Viral load testing and maintenance of testing machines

Five VL testing laboratories provide services in Nepal: NPHL, Sukraraj Tropical and Infectious Disease (Teku) Hospital, Koshi Hospital Laboratory, Pokhara Academy of Health Sciences, and Seti Hospital.

LINKAGES Nepal is planning to support VL testing using GeneXpert in Achham district and Surkhet district initially and then accross the country. LINKAGES Nepal also provides technical assistance to all VL testing sites and three staff members to NPHL for scaling up VL testing and optimization.

Annual maintenance and servicing support are provided for the VL testing machines. Instant support from LINKAGES Nepal and prompt action on maintenance of the machines reduces turnaround time of testing that could be caused by machine breakdown and transportation of samples to a functional one. LINKAGES Nepal IPs in the districts have provided computers and printers required for VL test report generation.

The VL testing continuum (Figure 2) includes counselling a person living with HIV, blood sample collection, database preparation, sample preparation, sample transportation and storage, sample processing, result analysis, and generation of a report to provide the VL status to the client.



Figure 2. Viral load testing continuum in Nepal

### From Virally Unsuppressed to Suppressed: Maya's Journey Back to Happiness

On November 30, 2017, Maya<sup>\*</sup> visited LINKAGES Nepal project's clinic at STD/AIDS Counseling and Training Services (SACTS), Kathmandu, to be tested for HIV. The mother of a two-year-old daughter, she had lost her husband to AIDS. She had never been tested for HIV. Identifying her as being at high risk for HIV, a

counselor stepped in to advise her about HIV, its mode of transmission, risk factors, and available treatment. Maya then agreed to be tested, and the result showed she was HIV positive. However, owing to misconceptions about HIV and citing her personal reasons, Maya denied treatment.

For five months, repeated attempts were made by the case manager and PN to encourage her to begin ART. Maya repeatedly denied ART and did not want to test her daughter for HIV either. The turning point was when Maya agreed to test her daughter in April 2018; the result was negative. Relieved and happy about the result, Maya finally agreed to treatment enrollment. She was enrolled on ART from LINKAGES Nepal IP Society for Positive Atmosphere and Related Support to HIV and AIDS (SPARSHA) Nepal on the same day.

However, after a few months, Maya discontinued ART without consultation. She cited mild side effects and fear of stigma as reasons for the discontinuation. The case manager from SACTS followed up on a daily basis to support and counsel her to resume treatment. As a result, in December 2018, Maya resumed treatment. Despite strict adherence to antiretroviral (ARV) medicines, when her VL was tested in January 2019, it was high. Maya was again regularly monitored and counseled on many occasions to participate in enhanced adherence counseling and support. This proved fruitful as her repeated VL test in April 2019 showed a suppressed VL.

## Analysis of 12 Virally Unsuppressed Cases

Details on 12 cases of unsuppressed VL were collected in this reporting period. Most respondents were male with a median age of 31 years. Two in every three respondents were aware of the benefits of ART and U=U message.

- Of the 12 cases with unsuppressed VL, 10 (83%) were male and two (17%) were female.
- Seven (58%) were Dalits, a marginalized group, aged 16–46 with median age of 31.
- Two respondents cited frequent migration as a cause of missed ARVs (one to India, other out of district).
- Ten (83%) reported experiencing some form of side effects ranging from insomnia and nausea to lethargy. One person reported TB, four stated symptoms of depression, and one was alcoholic.
- Six (50%) respondents had been on ART for less than five years.
- Six (50%) reported having missed ARVs for a certain period. Reasons included busy lifestyle, migration, fear or stigma, alcoholism, and experiences of side effects; one said that he was afraid the doctor would shout at him if he went for a checkup after having missed ARVs.
- Almost all claimed to know the advantages of ART and suppressed VL, including U=U.

**Way forward:** LINKAGES Nepal is providing enhanced adherence counseling support to the virally unsuppressed clients and repeat VL testing after three months. Motivational interviewing job aids and tools will be used for counseling and support to the unsuppressed individuals through online and off-line platforms. Similarly, on-site support to counselors at ART sites to enhance their skills in counseling for better adherence will be continued.

Maya now leads a healthy life with her young daughter. With the help of Women's for Women Forum (Mahila ka Nimti Mahila Manch), her daughter attends school. She realizes that health is the foundation of happiness and well-being. Faith in life and hope for a better future instilled by SACTS and LINKAGES Nepal is what guides Maya to secure her own and her daughter's life.

"I feel indebted to SACTS, the case manager, and peer navigator for their help, advice, and support every step of the way. They gave me medicines and advised on nutrition to make me better. I have received constant emotional support from them." — Maya \*Pseudonym



## LINKAGES Nepal COVID-19 Response Activities and Achievements

Since the Government of Nepal declared a nationwide lockdown on March 24, 2020, in response to the global COVID-19 pandemic, the project has initiated appropriate response mechanisms to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on the HIV program. As a result, the project now operates through virtual mentoring for HIV and COVID-19 prevention, risk assessment and referral for HIV testing, and care, support and treatment support, and supervision of the IPs and ART centers.

Our beneficiaries, which include groups of key populations (KPs) as well as PLHIV, have been receiving virtual support in these challenging times. CBSs and PNs deliver ARV medicines for those who cannot pick them up themselves by coordinating with government and nongovernment bodies. Post lockdown, during the months of April, May and June, 4,852 PLHIV received an uninterrupted ARV medicine supply via delivery to community, home, or ART center. Also, 1,001 KP individuals who are dependent on daily earning have been linked to government and other relief funds through our efforts. Apart from these activities, a COVID-19 response message matrix was drafted and shared with all IPs regarding online outreach as well as ARV medicines delivery, pill pick-up arrangements, and HIV testing and treatment with appropriate preventive measures. As a result, LINKAGES Nepal

has successfully tested 224 high-risk KP members of whom 66 tested HIV positive. Similarly, video clips of social media influencers were developed, and they were mobilized to promote HIV treatment services through social media platforms. LINKAGES Nepal has also initiated mobilization of virtual support group meetings.

Most important, LINKAGES Nepal successfully managed to procure and ship ARV drugs stuck in Mumbai, India despite the lockdown imposed in India, and Nepal by closely collaborating with US government officials in Nepal, India, shippers, clearing agents, NCASC, Save the Children/Global Fund, and other stakeholders. As a result, the probability of ARV medicine stock-out was thus evaded, ensuring uninterrupted ART for PLHIV in Nepal.

Trainings and orientations have been carried out through online participation using apps such as Microsoft Teams, Zoom, Skype, etc. Notably, Training on Going Online for HIV Services (two groups for a total 69 individuals), Motivational Interviewing for HIV Prevention, Treatment, Care and Support Services (two groups for a total of 59 individuals), and Peer Navigation Training (40 individuals), were conducted.



#### COVID-19 Prevention and Mitigation Efforts by LINKAGES Nepal Project (March – June 2020)



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"We have received excellent service during a difficult situation. There is high probability that we would have stopped ARV if PN/HA did not deliver them at home. It is difficult to visit ART centers during lockdown period for pills.

Beneficiary, Nari Chetana Samaj (NCS) "I was scared whether I will be able to survive this lockdown period in absence of ARV medicines and was really stressed. But, Devi Mahat, peer navigator from SAHAVAGI, visited me personally to provide medicines I needed. This made me realize that interpersonal relationships are much more important. You never know who will come handy for you on which day."

**Beneficiary, SAHAVAGI** 

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"I am so happy that NAMUNA staff delivered ARV medicine at my home because I am so worried for missing the pills and its effects on my health and other opportunistic infection in this critical situation. So, thanks a lot to NAMUNA staff for supporting us for continuing ARV medicine and saving lives."

Resident of Devdaha Municipality, Chitwan

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"Finally our dream comes true, and my happy tears shedding.Thank you everyone, it was possible due to hard work and continuous efforts of everyone."

Dr. Ramesh Kharel, Former Director, NCASC

### Important Activities and Events (January – June 2020)

LINKAGES Nepal contributed to the revision and finalization of National HIV Testing and Treatment Guidelines 2020.



LINKAGES Nepal conducted consultation and advocacy meeting with policy authorities of provincial- and local-level stakeholders in one province which resulted in an increased local budget for children affected by AIDS (CABA).

LINKAGES Nepal conducted continued medical education (CME) sessions at 21 LINKAGES Nepalsupported ART centers and provided updates to 1,169 health workers on upcoming changes in National HIV Testing and Treatment Guidelines 2020.



LINKAGES Nepal conducted a two-day orientation for workers on the implementation of ART services in community-based ART sites in LINKAGES Nepal city clinics.

LINKAGES Nepal organized a country consultation meeting jointly with USAID Nepal and discussed PEPFAR Regional Operational Plan (ROP) 2020 strategic approaches, priorities, and activities, and Asia ROP 2020 process and timeline.

LINKAGES Nepal along with major stakeholders Save the Children/Global Fund, UNAIDS, Country Coordinating Mechanism (CCM), WHO, and AHF supported NCASC to prepare and finalize National Standard Service Package for HIV services.

#### LINKAGES Nepal conducted the following trainings:

- Clinical management of HIV for doctors and paramedics
- HIV self-testing (HIVST)
- HIV pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP)
- Index testing for health workers in LINKAGES Nepal city clinics
- HIV program reporting in Health Management Information System (HMIS) to enable participants to report HTC and STI in District Health Information System (DHIS) of Government of Nepal
- Three batches of virtual trainings on Going Online for HIV Services to build the capacity of LINKAGES Nepal IPs staff on online outreach, promote booking tool among wider KPs to reach the project's overarching goal of 90-90-90.
- Three batches of virtual trainings on Motivational Interviewing for HIV Prevention, Treatment, Care and Support Services to strengthen knowledge and skills on motivational interviewing techniques and tools.
- Trained PNs about their roles and responsibilities in HIV case finding, treatment enrollment, treatment adherence, and VL testing including recording and reporting.



LINKAGES Nepal, in collaboration with NPHL and NCASC, conducted a one-day workshop on VL optimization with participants from government and civil societies, and other stakeholders involved in VL testing.



LINKAGES Nepal conducted campaigns during the Holi festival in social media and hot spots.

LINKAGES Nepal completed semi-annual data quality assessment (DQA) for all IPs.

LINKAGES Nepal conducted a workshop on review of one national HIV information system in collaboration with NCASC, AHF, Save the Children/ Global Fund, UNAIDS, USAID, and WHO.

LINKAGES Nepal organized a country consultation meeting jointly with USAID Nepal and discussed PEPFAR Regional Operational Plan (ROP) 2020 strategic approaches, priorities, and activities, and Asia ROP 2020 process and timeline.

LINKAGES Nepal conducted a three-day quarterly review meeting with IPs; discussed achievements, challenges, and future steps, including ROP 20 priorities.



LINKAGES Nepal participated in a PEPFAR and Global Fund funding and program realignment meeting with key HIV program partners.

LINKAGES Nepal conducted virtual orientation to Blue Diamond Society (BDS) and its 13 sub-IPs and shared program activities and working modalities from October 2019 to September 2020, subagreement management, project specific recording and reporting requirements and tools, and collaboration.

LINKAGES Nepal conducted a virtual quarterly review meeting (QRM) with IPs, sub-IPs, and network partner agencies and discussed achievements, challenges, and the way forward including Q3 FY20 programmatic and financial achievements and contingency plans to address COVID-19 lockdown.

LINKAGES Nepal facilitated a virtual sharing session on index testing organized by the USAID- and PEPFAR funded Accelerate project implemented by YR Gaitonde Centre for AIDS Research and Education (YRG) Care India to orient field teams on the steps and tools to screen intimate partner violence (IPV) in the context of index testing including the steps to monitor IPV and support for index clients. Similarly, LINKAGES Nepal shared its practices and experiences on mitigating the impact of COVID-19 on HIV community-based services during an internal webinar organized by LINKAGES.



LINKAGES Nepal conducted a virtual orientation offering knowledge and skills for health care providers on IPV in view of the COVID-19 pandemic.

LINKAGES Nepal conducted a virtual creative competition among staff from the IPs to keep staff engaged and motivated to work during COVID-19 situation.



LINKAGES Nepal provided technical assistance to Sudur Paschim Provincial Public Health Lab (PPHL) for COVID-19 diagnosis. The laboratory specialist trained PPHL staff for COVID-19 diagnosis by polymerase chain reaction (PCR) technology. Similarly, three laboratory staff (microbiologists) also provided COVID-19 diagnosis services at NPHL. LINKAGES Nepal also provided virtual TA to Rapti Academy of Health Sciences, Dang, for molecular laboratory setup.



LINKAGES Nepal conducted virtual support group meetings with PLHIV during which they shared their experiences and reviewed issues related to ART adherence, the need for VL testing and challenges of TLD transition. Similarly, LINKAGES Nepal mobilized virtual peer champions to prepare and share short audiovisual clips and promote ART initiation and adherence for HIV treatment.



LINKAGES Nepal supported NCASC to conduct an orientation on TLD transition for the staff of ART centers and updated staff about TLD transition as the first line regimen and alternate first line regimen. Step-down orientations were also conducted by IPs to field staff (PNs and CBSs).

LINKAGES Nepal conducted a virtual orientation on HIV index testing, protecting life in global health assistance (PLGHA), and environmental mitigation and monitoring plan (EMMP) to BDS sub-IPs and provided instructions on ethical index testing including IPV, adverse events monitoring for index testing. LINKAGES Nepal conducted a virtual meeting with NCASC regarding the initiation of community-based ART (CB-ART) and multi-month dispensing (MMD) to discuss the preparedness and initiation of CB-ART from LINKAGES Nepal IPs and the initiation of MMD from ART sites.

LINKAGES Nepal participated in series of stakeholders' meetings at NCASC to update and discuss further coordination for the transportation of ARV medicines stuck at various places in India during the lockdown and low stock situation of ARV medicines.

LINKAGES Nepal celebrated 37<sup>th</sup> International Candlelight Memorial Day and International Day Against Homophobia, Transphobia and Biphobia (IDAHOT) on May 18, 2020 with virtual events and activities despite the COVID-19 pandemic and the nation-wide lockdown. LINKAGES Nepal conducted different virtual activities to mark the LGBTIQ+ pride month in June 2020. Facebook profile picture frame was created and shared via MeroSathi Facebook. Digital flyers and posters were shared virtually. LINKAGES Nepal also supported a webinar on the theme of "celebrating pride, celebrating changemakers."



## Information and Communications Technology Assessment

LINKAGES Nepal conducted an information and communications technology (ICT) assessment. A total of 186 responses were collected this quarter from 20 different districts, the majority (36 percent) were from Kathmandu. Key findings appear below:



## Visitors Log (January – June 2020)

Jacqueline McPherson, regional director, FHI 360 Asia Pacific Regional Office (APRO), visited FHI 360 Nepal and met with LINKAGES Nepal project team, NCASC director, and IP SACTS team.





Virupax Ranebennur, senior technical advisor, and Purvi Shah, technical specialist, from LINKAGES headquarters visited LINKAGES Nepal and provided technical assistance on strategic information and Going Online activities.

A team of community partners, including representatives from USAID and FHI 360 APRO, visited LINKAGES Nepal February 11–14, 2020. They conducted a site-specific strength, weakness, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) analysis to identify ways to strengthen community-based activities.





LINKAGES Nepal IPs in Chitawan, Lalitpur and Makawanpur districts coordinated and facilitated monitoring and supportive visits from Bharatpur Hospital, Lalitpur Health Office and Hetauda Hospital.

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