



Combating HIV/AIDS in the Democratic Republic of Congo

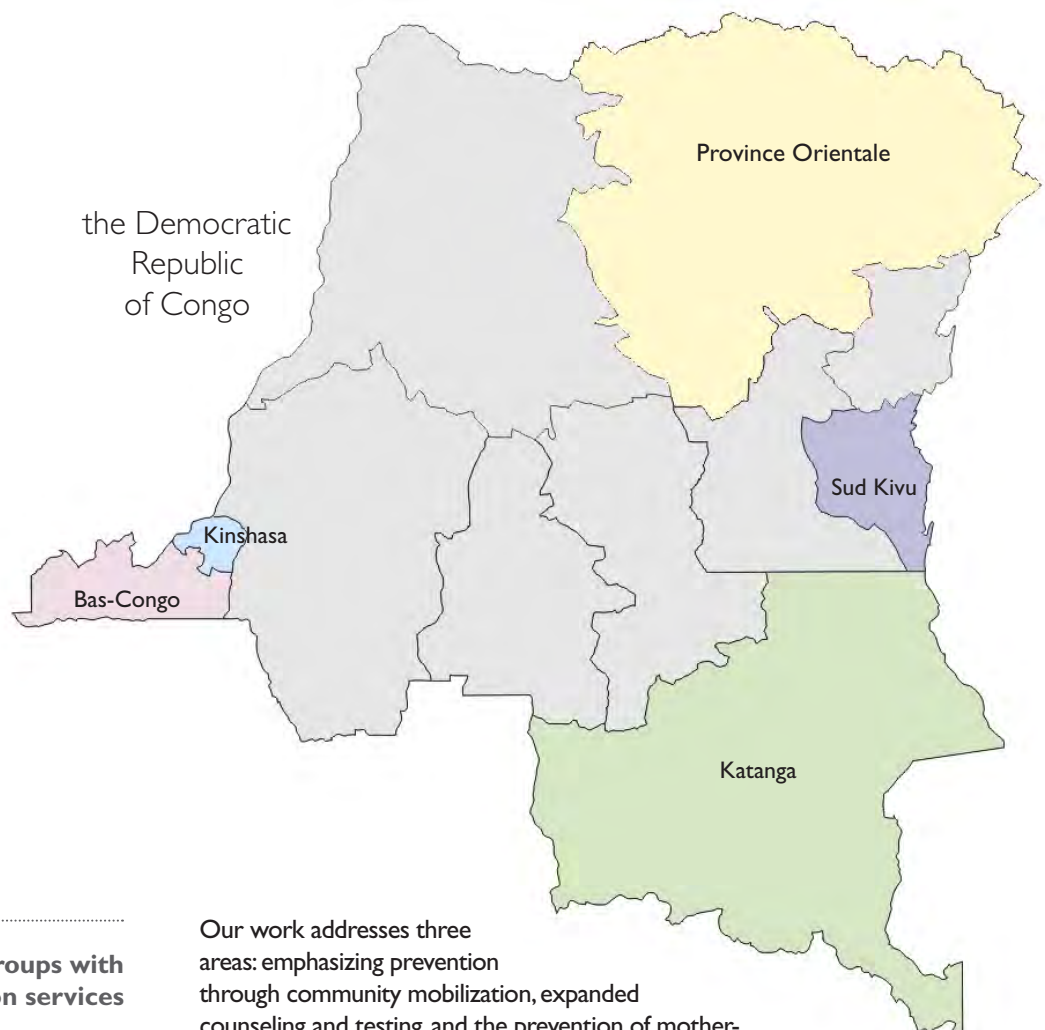


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PATH and our partners are addressing HIV/AIDS in communities throughout the DRC

Less than a decade after emerging from a violent war that collapsed public services and exacerbated poverty, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) is slowly transitioning to stability and rebuilding its health system, including its response to HIV/AIDS. The country's prevalence of HIV remains fairly low, but progress against the epidemic is stymied by extreme poverty and ongoing conflict in the east. The majority of DRC's population of nearly 71 million people has never been tested for HIV, and only a small fraction of people receive HIV/AIDS services and treatment.

Within this dynamic and challenging context, PATH leads a consortium of partners to reduce the transmission of HIV and deliver integrated HIV/AIDS care and services for people affected by the disease. Funded by the United States President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the DRC Integrated HIV/AIDS Project (ProVIC) collaborates with private and public partners in the country's five HIV hotspots to implement community-centered approaches for combating the disease.



Reaching at-risk groups with moonlight prevention services

ProVIC has reached more than 100,000 people with HIV counseling and testing through innovative nighttime services. To reach commercial sex workers, truckers, miners, and other people most at risk for becoming infected with HIV, the project sets up modern mobile tents at night in areas where these populations live and operate.

Our work addresses three areas: emphasizing prevention through community mobilization, expanded counseling and testing, and the prevention of mother-to-child transmission (PMTCT) of HIV; providing care and support to people living with HIV/AIDS and children orphaned by or vulnerable to the disease; and strengthening health systems to provide quality prevention, care, and support services. ProVIC operates in the regions of Kinshasa, Bas-Congo, Province Orientale, Sud Kivu, and Katanga, where the impact of HIV is most severe, and now reaches more than 750,000 people per year with important services and messages about the disease. It is the largest community-based HIV project in DRC.

Engaging communities in prevention

Community involvement is critical for slowing the spread of HIV. The foundation of our strategy is the Champion Community approach, through which we assist communities affected by HIV/AIDS to organize, assess, plan, implement, and monitor their response to the epidemic. To date, these efforts have reached more than a million people with HIV prevention messages.

ProVIC works intensively with 40 champion communities to assist in identifying problems, setting goals, developing action plans, and monitoring progress, especially with regard to health outcomes for the communities' most vulnerable populations. Community members use group discussions, door-to-door outreach, and peer education to influence change around family planning, stigma, counseling and testing, gender-based violence, and other HIV-related behaviors.



Gabrielle Bielen

With our partners, we have trained 4,800 volunteers and community workers in HIV/AIDS knowledge, community mobilization, interpersonal communication, and how to reach marginalized and vulnerable groups. In Bas-Congo and Sud Kivu, we are also addressing the family planning needs of young people by

training community workers to integrate family planning into HIV/AIDS services offered at youth centers.

Empowering children for change

ProVIC partners brought together children from three champion communities for a special event to celebrate Universal Children's Day. With support from the mayor and other local community leaders, children affected by HIV made speeches about hygiene, health protection, and the disease. The event inspired several schools through the province to use ProVIC's child-to-child approach in their programs.

ProVIC promotes universal access to HIV counseling and testing and employs innovative approaches to ensure these services reach the highest-risk groups. Our work also focuses on strengthening the government's capacity for providing PMTCT services, increasing pediatric counseling and testing and referrals for antiretroviral drugs, and expanding access to comprehensive PMTCT services. ProVIC was the first partner in DRC to integrate new World Health Organization guidelines for PMTCT throughout all of our project sites, taking an important step toward reducing children's risk of contracting HIV.

Supporting orphans, vulnerable children, and people with HIV

Care, support, and treatment services for people living with HIV/AIDS (PLWHA), children orphaned by or vulnerable to HIV, and their families are still in their infancy in DRC. The ProVIC team works with the DRC government and local organizations to develop and strengthen services for these groups.

We establish self-support groups in which members build solidarity and courage in the face of discrimination and can access medical, psychosocial, nutritional, counseling, and other services through an organized structure. Our child-to-child groups help young people discuss obstacles they face, such as lack of access to drinking water or safe play space, and feel involved in decisions that affect their lives and the whole community. These groups have become a key facet of our innovative and sustainable approach.



Gilbert Kapila



Through our partnerships with local groups within the 40 champion communities, social workers and community volunteers conduct home visits with PLWHA and their families to provide nutritional guidance, supply medication against opportunistic infections, answer questions about at-home care, and offer other forms of support. We support income-generating activities, such as tailoring and small-scale farming, that empower PLWHA to become financially independent. We also advocate on behalf of PLWHA to protect their rights under a new protection law passed in the DRC.

Text messaging for prevention

In partnership with a Congolese cellular phone company, ProVIC reached about 2.3 million cellular phone subscribers throughout the country with SMS messages designed to enhance awareness of HIV prevention and encourage behavior change. The SMS messages promoted abstinence, being faithful, and using condoms to prevent sexually transmitted infections, including HIV.

Promoting gender equity and combating gender-based violence

Gender-based violence (GBV) constitutes a major public health issue in the DRC. Within the DRC, Bukavu in the east and Kisangani in the north are considered hotspots for both HIV/AIDS and GBV. Exposure to physical and sexual violence and power inequity in relationships may contribute to poor health outcomes and put women and girls at risk for new HIV infections. Within this context, ProVIC is expanding access to HIV counseling and testing in ways that support women and girls and address the stigma and violence they may face. Through champion communities, we actively engage community members, including men, in transforming deeply ingrained attitudes and behaviors to support equitable relationships and prevent GBV for long-term, sustainable impact. And we are linking survivors with the holistic services they need by training health workers, strengthening referral networks, and providing our partners with tools they can use to prevent violence in their communities and address the needs of those who have experienced GBV.

Strengthening health systems

To improve health systems to better support HIV/AIDS services, ProVIC is partnering with the government and national organizations to develop tools, policies, and training guides. We provide the government with technical assistance to align training materials with national guidelines and conduct workshops to update providers' knowledge and skills. We also train our local partners in data collection and evaluation, enabling improved data quality and reporting on HIV in the communities where we work.

About ProVIC

ProVIC is PEPFAR's five-year, US \$49.6 million flagship project in the DRC. Through ProVIC, PATH leads a consortium of partners that includes Chemonics International, the Elizabeth Glaser Pediatric AIDS Foundation, and the International HIV/AIDS Alliance.

For more information about ProVIC, please visit <http://sites.path.org/hivaidssandtb/provic>, or contact Trad Hatton, ProVIC chief of party, at thatton@provic.org.

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