

A healthy start for mothers and babies

Country- and Community-Led Scale-Up of Accessible, Integrated, and Family-Centered EVT Plus Services for a Healthy Start

SAFEStart+

While childhood survival rates have significantly improved in the past decade, every year, approximately five million children die before their fifth birthday—almost half are newborns in their first month of life. Vertical transmission of HIV, syphilis, hepatitis B virus (HBV), and Chagas disease is a leading cause of preventable stillbirth and child mortality. Timely diagnosis and treatment are critical to protect the health and well-being of women, infants, and young children.

Fragmented health systems, low service availability and uptake, and complex market barriers impede the elimination of vertical transmission (EVT)¹ of HIV, syphilis, HBV, and Chagas disease in low- and middle-income countries, even though the tools and approaches to address these barriers exist. These include accelerating access to the optimal combination of screening, diagnosis, prevention, and treatment products and platforms; enabling integrated services and systems through primary health care reforms; creating enabling community and health facility environments strengthening country and community leadership; and addressing evidence and market gaps.

Through partnership and funding from Unitaid, PATH with the International Community of Women living with HIV Eastern Africa (ICWEA) and World Hepatitis Alliance (WHA) are leading a four-year project designed for maximum reach and impact: Country- and Community-Led Scale-Up of Accessible, Integrated, and Family-Centered EVT Plus Services for a Healthy Start (SAFEStart+). SAFEStart+ is accelerating demand and adoption of evidence-based approaches and integrated delivery strategies to eliminate vertical transmission of HIV, syphilis, HBV, Chagas disease, and other emerging diseases, such as Ebola and mpox.

Geographies

In 19 countries across Africa, Asia, and Latin America (see figure), SAFEStart+ is working to:

- Scale up integrated EVT programs in four core countries: Malawi, Nigeria, Paraguay, and Uganda.
- Address specific barriers to EVT scale-up and validation in five focus countries: Brazil,

Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Senegal, South Africa, and Vietnam.

- Promote continuous learning, strategic knowledge-sharing, and exchange of innovations, successes, and lessons to further increase adoption and scale-up of evidence-based EVT approaches in ten peer-learning countries: Cambodia, Cote d'Ivoire, El Salvador, The Gambia, Ghana, Kenya, Mozambique, Philippines, Tanzania, and Zimbabwe.
- Advance regional policy, learning, and market-shaping interventions in Africa, Asia, and Latin America to accelerate global progress with support from the World Health Organization (WHO) and Pan American Health Organization (PAHO).
- Accelerate the integration of WHO-recommended diagnostic tools and approaches in outbreak response settings.

Figure: SAFEStart+ project countries



Scope

The project is centered on the following areas:

- **Strong community and stakeholder leadership to design and demonstrate country-led demand, adoption, and scale-up of EVT models and systems strengthening.** This includes evidence generation and learning through programmatic monitoring and evaluation, continuous quality improvement, and cost modeling that facilitates

1. SAFEStart+ project uses "elimination of vertical transmission" instead of "prevention (or elimination) of mother-to-child transmission" to refer to transmission of HIV as well as hepatitis B, syphilis, and Chagas. This aligns with the WHO's emphasis on non-stigmatizing language, noting that use of EVT can help reduce possible blame that women living with HIV may experience

adoption of effective tools and differentiated packages of EVT in low- and middle-income countries.

- **Targeted implementation science where additional evidence is needed to improve EVT access and uptake.** This includes addressing gaps in normative and operational guidance within EVT programming, such as how best to implement screening, diagnosis, treatment, and prevention for HBV and syphilis.
- **Strategic market shaping for essential new and underused EVT products.** This includes manufacturer engagement to ensure affordability and sustained supply.
- **Adoption and financing of integrated EVT programs and systems by governments and donors for long-term sustainability** through evidence dissemination, community-generated evidence, regional learning and strategic advocacy, and an investment case for greater scale.

Country and community leadership

Through SAFESStart+, governments, communities, and public- and private-sector providers drive the design, execution, and scale of country-tailored EVT initiatives. National technical working groups serve as hubs for EVT service and system improvements and scale-up.

Community leadership is a key pillar of SAFESStart+ project implementation. Project co-leads, ICWEA and WHA, ensure strong community engagement through their established global networks representing women living with HIV and HBV, respectively. They are facilitating a global community advisory board and community advisory boards in core countries to provide oversight and input on project approaches, research, community led monitoring, advocacy, and awareness. ICWEA and WHA will also support community-based organizations through a small grants program in core, focus, and peer learning countries.

Anticipated impact

SAFESStart+ expects to make public health impacts on maternal lives saved, reduced stillbirths, and neonatal mortality as well as economic impacts by addressing health system efficiencies through service and systems integration, the scale-up of EVT at lower health system levels, and the introduction of new diagnostic, treatment, and prevention tools. The project will also strengthen

community accountability and evidence-informed decision-making for integrated EVT services.

In addition, greenhouse gas emission analyses of benzathine penicillin G and triplex tests will provide evidence on the climate impact of product manufacturing and delivery. This will be used to develop climate-informed procurement tools, resulting in a more sustainable market that enables scale-up of integrated EVT programs and greener procurement.

SAFESStart+ can avert an estimated 47,000 infections, corresponding to 179,000 million disability-adjusted life years averted during its four-year implementation. The project estimates a declining incidence for neonatal HIV, HBV, and Chagas disease from 2025 to 2030, with the incidence stabilizing at 2030 levels post-project.

Strong consortium and critical partnerships

With support from Unitaid, PATH, ICWEA, and WHA co-lead SAFESStart+ driving multi-country implementation and research.

Mundo Sano (Paraguay) and the Solina Centre for International Development and Research (Nigeria) lead implementation and coordination of local partners in their respective countries, while PATH does the same for Malawi and Uganda. Partners leading work in focused-activity countries include Environment and Development Action (ENDA Santé; Senegal), Ezintsha (South Africa), and Global Health Strategies (Brazil), while PATH leads efforts in the DRC and Vietnam.

Technical partners include the University of Washington (research), Harvard University (modeling), and the Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (regional learning). Mundo Sano is the regional learning partner for Latin America in alignment with PAHO and the Brazil Ministry of Health, while WHA serves as the Asia regional learning partner in coordination with the WHO. SAFESStart+ will also work closely with WHO and PAHO as they implement grants to catalyze complementary EVT activities.

A project steering committee comprising multilateral, community, and technical stakeholders advises on high-level strategic direction and coordination with other stakeholders supporting EVT to minimize duplication of efforts, align with donor priorities, mobilize resources for scale-up, support risk mitigation, and resolve issues.

About PATH

PATH is a global nonprofit advancing health innovations with and for the people who need them most. With nearly 50 years of experience, a global team of experts, and trusted partnerships spanning 70+ countries, PATH turns breakthroughs into better health for millions every single year. Learn more at www.path.org.

About Unitaid

We save lives by making new health products available and affordable for people in low- and middle-income countries. We work with partners to identify innovative treatments, tests and tools, help tackle the market barriers that are holding them back, and get them to the people who need them most—fast. Since we were created in 2006, we have unlocked access to more than 100 groundbreaking health products to help address the world's biggest health challenges, including HIV, TB, and malaria; women's and children's health; and pandemic prevention, preparedness, and response. Every year, more than 300 million people benefit from the products we've helped roll out. Learn more at www.unitaid.org.

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