

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

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 of these infections are critical to protect the health and well-being of women, infants, and young children.

While fragmented health systems, low availability and uptake of services, 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, 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 as part of ongoing country primary health care reforms; strengthening country and community leadership; and addressing evidence and market gaps.

Through partnership and funding from Unitaid, PATH and the project's co-leads, 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 (SAFESStart+). SAFESStart+ is accelerating demand and adoption of evidence-based approaches and integrated delivery strategies to eliminate vertical transmission of HIV, syphilis, HBV, and Chagas disease.

Geographies

SAFESStart+ is working across countries to:

- Scale up integrated EVT programs in four core-engagement countries: Malawi, Nigeria, Paraguay, and Uganda.
- Address specific barriers to EVT scale-up and validation in five focused-activity countries: Brazil, Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Senegal, South Africa, and Vietnam.

SAFESStart+ project countries



- Actively disseminate innovations, successes, and lessons learned 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).

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 feeds into accelerating 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.

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

- **Strategic market shaping for essential new and underused EVT products.** This includes manufacturer engagement to ensure affordability and sustained supply and accelerate country regulatory processes.
- **Adoption and financing of country and regional integrated EVT programs by governments and donors** through evidence dissemination, regional learning and advocacy, and an investment case for greater scale-up.

Anticipated impact

The project 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 scaling up EVT at lower system levels and introduction of new diagnostic, treatment, and prevention tools.

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 of EVT products.

It is estimated that SAFESStart+ can avert 47,000 infections, which corresponds to 179,000 million disability-adjusted life years averted. 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.

Country and community leadership

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

In core project countries, community advisory boards guide community-led monitoring, advocacy, and stigma-reduction efforts, while a global community advisory board provides oversight on project approaches, research, and advocacy.

Strong consortium and critical partnerships

With support from Unitaid, PATH leads the SAFESStart+ project consortium focused on multi-country implementation and research. PATH employs a co-leadership model, working closely with consortium partners ICWEA and WHA to ensure strong community engagement and leadership for SAFESStart+. Each with established global networks, ICWEA and WHA represent women living with HIV and HBV, respectively. They will support participation of community-based organizations participation through a small grants program.

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 the 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 the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) and the Brazil Ministry of Health, while PATH serves as the Asia regional learning partner in coordination with the World Health Organization (WHO). PATH will also work closely with WHO and PAHO as they implement grants to catalyze complementary EVT activities supported by the SAFESStart+ project.

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 dedicated to achieving health equity. With more than 40 years of experience forging multisector partnerships, and with expertise in science, economics, technology, advocacy, and dozens of other specialties, PATH develops and scales up innovative solutions to the world's most pressing health challenges. 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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