

PACIFIC HEADS OF HEALTH

Réunion des directeurs de la santé du Pacifique

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ADDRESSING THE HIV EPIDEMIC IN FIJI: REGIONAL IMPACTS, AND THE NEED FOR A PACIFIC REGIONAL STRATEGY

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At a Glance

- The HIV epidemic poses a significant health challenge globally, especially in the Pacific region, with Fiji experiencing a concerning trend in new infections & existing vulnerabilities
- A Regional HIV Strategy is critical for effective response, collective action, evidence-based interventions, and community engagement in curbing the spread of HIV, addressing the root causes of vulnerability, low condom use, weak sex education programmes and increasing injecting drug use across the Pacific, and ultimately safeguarding the health security of Pacific Island nations.



Current Situation in the Pacific

- Pacific nations lagging behind 2030 AIDS-ending goals.
- Rising generation in the Pacific with inadequate HIV knowledge.
- Challenges: Limited resources, changing donor priorities, health system weaknesses.
- Key at-risk populations lacking tailored services.

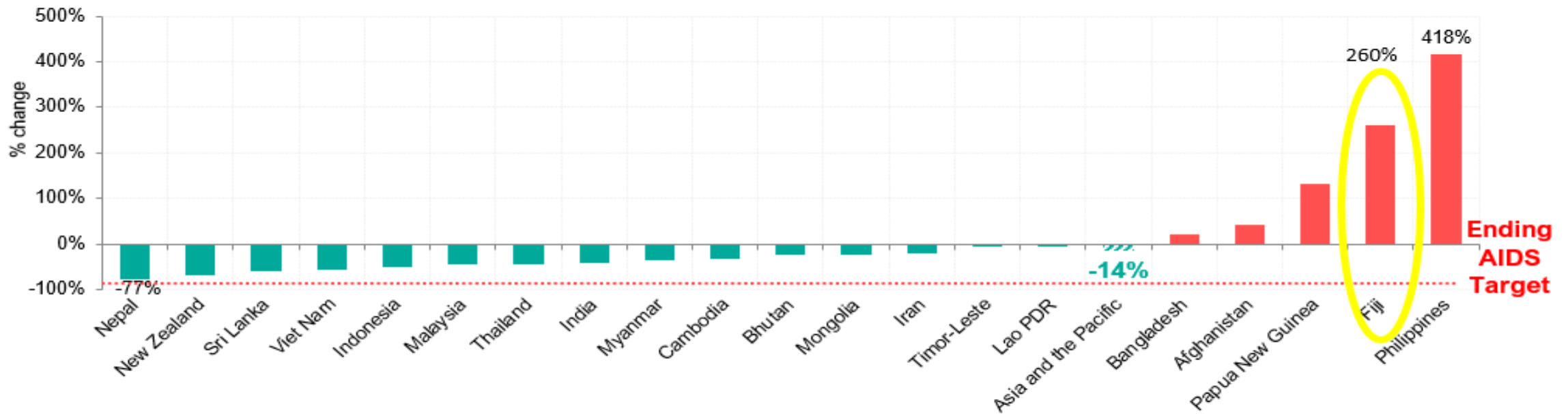


2023 HIV Programmatic Data Selected PIC's

Country	New cases	PLHIV (diagnosed)	On treatment	Deaths
Fiji	415	1390	580	82
Micronesia (FSM)	4	18	14	0
Samoa	0	12	12	0
Kiribati	0	8	8	1
Marshall Islands (RMI)	0	7	7	0
Vanuatu	0	7	7	0
Palau	2	8	8	0
Tonga	0	5	5	1
Cook Islands	0	0	0	0
Nauru	0	2	2	0
Tuvalu	0	1	1	0
Niue	0	0	0	0
Solomon Islands	3	16	16	0

Asia-Pacific Epidemic Outlook

Percentage change in new HIV infections by country, Asia and the Pacific, 2010-2022



Source: Prepared by www.aidsdatahub.org based on UNAIDS 2023 HIV Estimates



Vulnerabilities and Emerging Trends

Fiji is the 'hub of the Pacific',

- Fiji it is a transit point for the vast migration between the Pacific, Australia and New Zealand. This is a red flag for disrupting health security among these countries.
- The existence of HIV drivers such as low condom use, poor sex education and high TB burden coupled with poor HIV data and behavioural studies will lead to a health security crisis in the Pacific.



Vulnerabilities and Emerging Trends

- Injecting Drug Use (IDU)
- Fiji and a growing trend in Tonga and Samoa
- While efforts on border protection are being made, issues arising from domestic use need to be dealt with early, as the impacts of drug use in communities are detrimental. Recent police seizures in Fiji, Tonga and Solomon Islands are indicative to the availability of synthetic drugs for local consumption.



Synthetic drug seizures by police in Fiji
Photo: Fiji Police

Vulnerabilities and Emerging Trends



Extremely High STI rates-

- While the Pacific region may not be a high HIV-incidence setting, most countries in the region represent a (very) high STI-incidence setting.
- The most common curable STIs are syphilis, gonorrhoea, chlamydia, trichomoniasis, as well as hepatitis B. Chlamydia rates among women 15-25 years are among the highest in the world, especially in Fiji, FSM, Samoa, Kiribati, Tonga and Vanuatu. In addition, non-curable STIs, including herpes simplex virus and HPV are also common. Reliable STI data are scarce in the region, as most treatment is syndromic, with no systematic testing done in most countries. A limited number of studies show high STI rates across the Western Pacific region.

Vulnerabilities and Emerging Trends

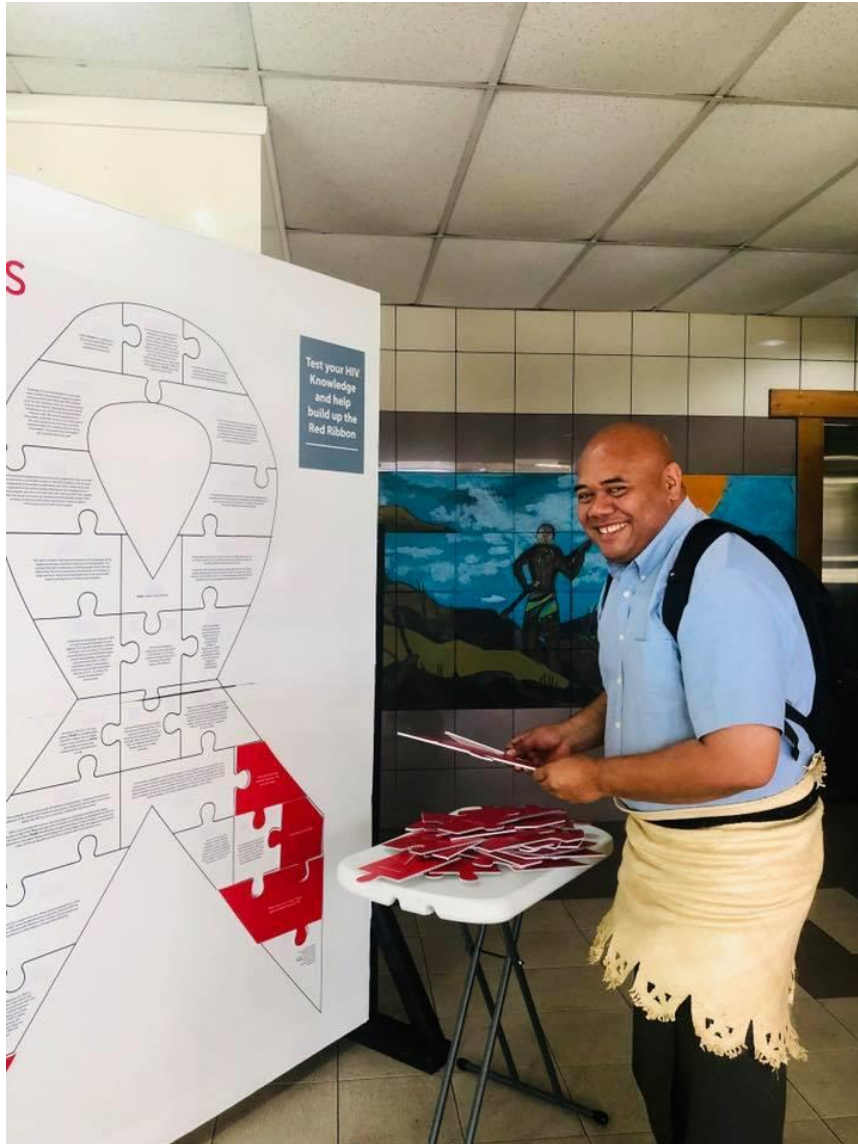
- **HIV Knowledge and Demand for Services**
- In the Pacific region HIV testing and demand for services are concerningly low. According to the Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS)
 - In 2019 for **Samoa** HIV knowledge is low 6 and 9 percent for men and women respectively from ages 15-29
 - In 2019 in **Tonga** this was 9 and 15 percent for the same age group.
- HIV testing and knowledge of HIV status:
- **Samoa** 15-24 year old less than 4% and in **Tonga** this was reported as 2% for both male and female.
- In **Fiji** (MICS, 2021), Women and Men aged 15-49 undergoing HIV test in the last 12 months and know their test results are very low at 7 per cent and 4 per cent, respectively.

Vulnerabilities and Emerging Trends

- **High Risk Behaviours**

- minimal use of condoms among key populations and young people.
- **Fiji- Men who have sex with Men (MSM) only 24% used a condom at their last anal sex.** The MICS, 2021 in Fiji survey revealed **very low condom use** among people with **multiple partners** stating that **24 per cent of men and 9 per cent of women** between the ages of 15-49 years old had reported using a condom at their last sexual encounter. Condom use among **young people (15-24 years old) who have non-regular partners** at last sexual encounter was **28.7 per cent for women and 39.8 per cent for men.**
- **Samoan women reported 10% condom use at last sexual encounter and men at 14% (MICS, 2019) ,**





Future Vision for the Pacific

- Unified regional effort aligning with UNAIDS 2030 goals.
- Strengthened government ownership and community leadership.
- A Pacific Regional Strategy to mitigate new HIV infections and reintegrate into global efforts.

Global AIDS Strategic Priorities and Result Areas

1. Maximize equitable and equal access to HIV services and solutions

1. Prevention
2. Test, treat, care, viral suppression
3. Vertical transmission, paediatric AIDS

2. Break down barriers to achieving HIV outcomes

4. Community-led responses
5. Human rights and gender equality
6. Gender equality
7. Young people

3. Fully resource and sustain efficient HIV response and integrate into systems for health, social protection, crises and pandemic responses

8. Fully funded and efficient HIV response
9. Integration of HIV into systems for health and social protection
10. Humanitarian settings and pandemics



Result Areas: Services

(1) Prevention: (2) Test, treat, care, viral suppression; (3) Vertical transmission and paediatric AIDS

- Contextual to the Pacific under these result areas:
 - i) Health Systems Strengthening through the improvement of basic HIV health services that include Combination HIV Prevention for All, testing services, referral pathways and accessible HIV treatment.
 - ii) Increasing a demand for HIV services.
 - iii) Introduction of innovative solutions for prevention and testing such as PrEP (pre-exposure prophylaxis) and self-testing for HIV
 - iv) Harm Reduction Services: Introducing comprehensive harm reduction services for people who use drugs, including needle and syringe programs to prevent new HIV infections.

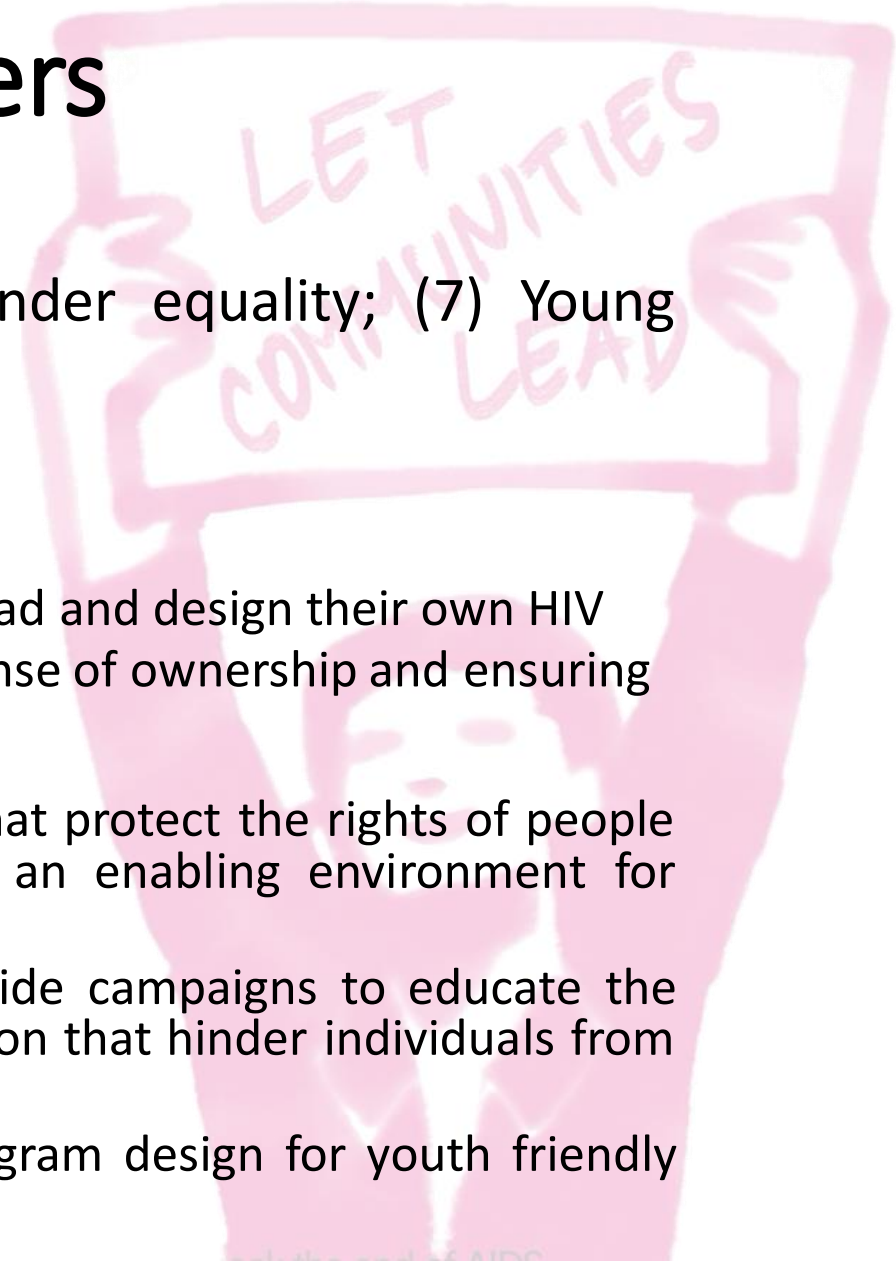


Result Areas: Breaking Down Barriers

(4) Community-led responses; (5) Human rights; (6) Gender equality; (7) Young people;

- For the Pacific these would include:

- i) **Community-Led Programming:** Empowering communities to lead and design their own HIV programs that address local needs and priorities, fostering a sense of ownership and ensuring that interventions are culturally appropriate and effective.
- ii) **Supportive Legislation for HIV:** Enacting and enforcing laws that protect the rights of people living with HIV, decriminalize HIV transmission, and create an enabling environment for effective HIV responses.
- iii) **Reduced Stigma and Discrimination:** Implementing region-wide campaigns to educate the public on HIV, aiming to dismantle the stigma and discrimination that hinder individuals from seeking and receiving HIV services.
- iv) **Gender empowerment** and inclusion of young people in program design for youth friendly services.



Result Areas: Resources and Sustainability

- (8). A fully funded and efficient HIV response; (9). Integration of HIV into health and social protection systems; and (10) Humanitarian settings
- **Priorities for the Pacific should include:**
 - i) Sustainable Financing:** Securing sustainable financing mechanisms for HIV programs, ensuring that funding is both adequate and continuous to support the long-term success of HIV prevention and treatment strategies in the Pacific.
 - ii) Integration of the continuation of HIV services** for vulnerable populations and availability of HIV medication access during humanitarian crisis such as **natural disasters**.

Why Urgent Action is Needed

- Rising HIV infections in Fiji signal a broader regional health crisis.
- Interconnectedness and mobility in the region necessitate a unified approach.
- Immediate action can leverage international support to avert a health security crisis.



Recommendations to be considered by the Heads of Health

- Pacific Island countries unite to formulate a regional HIV response strategy and mobilize resources through international support or domestic funds to strengthen their national response by:
 - protecting healthy security through **country ownership** addressing problematic challenges focusing on health system strengthening through upscaling innovative health prevention tailor-made services for creating demand for HIV services and improving the detection of these infections, treatment adherence, and monitoring treatment in the Pacific.
 - Recognize the importance of **community leadership** and create an enabling environment in which civil society can fully contribute to the implementation of programs to expand essential services and cater towards to hard-to-reach populations.

Recommendations to be considered by Development Partners

- Development Partners in the Pacific support national actions through providing technical assistance towards:
 - Support the development of a Pacific Regional HIV strategy
 - Improving strategic information to produce data that can positively impact and inform national HIV strategies to address the gaps that exist in current programs.
 - Contribute towards the upskilling of civil society for community leadership to implement community led programming and monitoring.
 - Enhance the potential of health technologies and innovations to advance the HIV responses.

Thank You