

HIV IN THE TIME OF COVID-19:

The Case for Investment

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the critical importance of investing in public health and ongoing scientific innovation to protect communities against infectious diseases. Faced with competing demands and economic strain caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, it is critical that governments maintain vital funding and resources needed to tackle the HIV epidemic or risk a resurgence of new HIV infections.¹

The risks of reduced funding to HIV

Financial support for HIV has been on a downward trajectory over the past decade suggesting that a growing number of countries do not consider HIV as a public health priority.² Every new HIV infection represents an ongoing cost to the healthcare system; cuts in financial support could be a false economy and lead to longer-term negative social and economic consequences. Studies suggest a direct link between economic downturns and long-term negative impact on public health;³ in some countries where HIV funding has declined, new HIV infections have increased, resulting in an even greater long-term cost than the funding cut.^{4,5}

Reduced funding for HIV prevention, testing, treatment, and care services threatens to undermine global and national commitments to end HIV by 2030. Unless we reverse this, we risk undermining decades of progress in combatting HIV. Underinvestment would also exacerbate existing HIV-related inequities, resulting in a greater burden of HIV risk and infection within vulnerable communities that need the most support.^{6,7}

Investment in HIV improves health outcomes and lowers healthcare costs

Innovation and access to effective prevention, testing and treatment tools have been an important cornerstone of progress against the HIV epidemic.⁸ Funding that

broadens access to HIV prevention and testing services has demonstrated value in improving health outcomes by diagnosing people with HIV earlier and lowering the risk of HIV transmission.^{9,10} Support for community-led interventions is also critical for connecting at-risk communities with the health system.

Over the last thirty years, advances in treatment have helped people living with HIV live longer and have transformed HIV into a manageable chronic condition. Achieving and maintaining an undetectable viral load in the long-term through antiretroviral treatment not only preserves the health of people living with HIV and reduces the risk of comorbidities, but also has the added public health benefit of preventing transmission of the virus to others.

Coverage and reimbursement of HIV prevention and treatment regimens should be underpinned by strong policies that prioritize equitable access and affordability of newer, innovative medicines that can lower healthcare costs. Access to medicines that are highly effective, have an improved safety profile, and are easier to take can promote improved long-term health outcomes, reducing healthcare utilization and overall healthcare costs.¹¹ As investigations in scientific innovation look towards long-acting prevention and treatment regimens, and ultimately, a functional cure, healthcare systems should ensure that patients have access to innovative HIV medicines, with reimbursement systems in place if necessary, to lower healthcare costs and end the epidemic.

A strong political commitment is needed

Decreasing funding in HIV risks weakening the very healthcare systems that are preventing the virus from resurging. Urgent action is required by governments to protect HIV funding including the medicines budgets supported by a strong political commitment to take a long-term view of the value of investment in HIV. It is only with sufficient domestic public funding in HIV that healthcare systems will be able to maintain and continue progress made towards ending the HIV epidemic.

Policy Recommendations

- » **Increase dedicated funding for HIV and build strong political commitment for investing in efforts to end the HIV epidemic.**

- » **Ensure adequate funding to support equitable access and optimal outcomes, particularly for those most impacted by and vulnerable to HIV.**

- » **Introduce financing and policies to ensure routine and targeted HIV testing, including self-testing, is available at no or low cost to all.**

- » **Maintain funding for the most effective HIV prevention programs and innovative therapies.**

- » **Provide sustainable financing to support adoption of and access to innovative HIV treatment options and reimbursement decisions that incorporate long-term health benefits and cost efficiencies of HIV medicines.**

- » **Scale up investments for NGOs and CBOs that provide HIV education, testing, prevention, treatment and care services to communities that are disproportionately impacted by HIV.**

References

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