



Action Towards a HIV-Free Future: Eliminating Vertical Transmission

The urgency of addressing the health needs of children has never been more pressing. Despite significant gains in preventing vertical transmission of HIV, progress has stalled. New HIV infections in children continue to be unacceptably high: In 2023, there were approximately 120,000 new HIV infections among children under five years old.¹ This represents a significant decline from 300,000 new infections in 2010², marking a 62% reduction, but is far below the 2020 global target of 20,000 new infections.³

Elimination of Vertical Transmission (EVT) of HIV is a crucial public health objective aimed at reducing and ultimately preventing new HIV infections in children and ensuring the well-being of their mothers. The World Health Organization (WHO) defines a country as having reached EVT when the annual targets of having fewer than 50 new pediatric infections per 100,000 live births and a transmission rate of <5% in breastfeeding populations or <2% in non-breastfeeding populations.⁴ To date, no sub-Saharan African countries have eliminated vertical transmission of HIV.⁵

With 90% of all children living with HIV globally located in Africa, fulfilling the promise of EVT will be a seismic epidemiological victory with impact felt well beyond African borders. Parliamentarians have a significant and critical role to play in promoting strong visible leadership and accountability across the political, traditional, community, and civil society spheres at national levels, and their involvement is essential for achieving national EVT goals in Africa and beyond. This is not the time for complacency. It's an opportunity to redouble investments to eliminate vertical transmission.

How Parliamentarians Can Support Reaching EVT Goals

We have the tools and biomedical interventions to support EVT, but to reach the WHO's EVT targets, we need to scale up high-quality HIV prevention, care, and treatment strategies to all women of reproductive ages before, during, and after pregnancy. These include antiretroviral therapy (ART), prevention of mother-to-child transmission (PMTCT) programs, early infant diagnosis, safe infant feeding practices, pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP), male circumcision, and post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP), among others.

Parliamentarians must rally high-influence stakeholders to take decisive action in the fight to eliminate vertical transmission. By coordinating and driving these efforts, parliamentarians can help create an enabling environment that ensures every necessary step is taken to protect children from HIV, making the elimination of vertical transmission a reality. The following section highlights some of the actions points and key advocacy messages that parliamentarians can make at the key levels of government, service delivery, and civil society to support efforts to achieving EVT.

¹ [Elimination of mother-to-child transmission - UNICEF DATA](#)

² [Elimination of mother-to-child transmission - UNICEF DATA](#)

³ A Guide Through the WHO eMTCT Validation Process - EGPAF (pedaids.org)

⁴ Global Guidance on Criteria And Processes For Validation: Elimination of Mother-to-Child Transmission of HIV and Syphilis

⁵ However, Botswana has been certified to be on the path to elimination and other countries in sub-Saharan Africa are submitting requests for certification for being on the path to elimination. Botswana reaches key milestone in the elimination of mother-to-child transmission of HIV <https://www.who.int/news-room/feature-stories/detail/botswana-award-feature>

Governments



- Budget adequate domestic resources to implement EVT strategic plans.
- Demonstrate strong political will and leadership to drive and achieve EVT goals. This includes recognizing and implementing regional and global commitments that address EVT on a national level.
- Eliminate user fees associated with critical services such as routine antenatal care tests like syphilis, hepatitis B and point-of-care early infant diagnosis (POC EID).
- Amend laws and policies to create an environment that allows access to EVT services free from stigma and discrimination, particularly for adolescent girls and victims of sexual / gender-based violence.
- Leverage and strengthen multi-stakeholder action across all governments to address new HIV cases among children.

Service Delivery Implementers



- Improve accessibility of non-discriminatory and patient-centered PMTCT services for adolescent girls by updating guidelines and building the capacity of health care providers in providing adolescent and youth-friendly health services.
- Expand access to POC EID across multiple entry points: This is crucial for closing the pediatric HIV testing and treatment gap.
- Boost availability and access to new pediatric-friendly antiretroviral formulations or regimens and build the capacity of health care providers and caregivers to sustain quality of care.
- Reinforce national guidelines and standard operating procedures to ensure that HIV-negative pregnant and breastfeeding mothers are tested for HIV at their first antenatal care visit (and retested during the third trimester and breastfeeding period) and adhere to ART during their pregnancy and postpartum period.
- Support and create demand for universal access to combination HIV prevention packages, including PrEP, partner testing and HIV services, STI screening and prevention, condoms, etc., for HIV-negative clients. Without interventions to ensure that pregnant and breastfeeding women who are HIV-negative stay that way, preventing the spread of pediatric HIV is challenging.

Civil Society



- Increase community monitoring to ensure high-quality HIV service delivery.
- Promote community-based approaches including index testing and self-testing to identify male partners in supportive environments.
- Reinforce basic antenatal care messaging, namely by encouraging pregnant women to visit a health facility as early as possible with their husbands/partners. Women should make at least eight antenatal care visits during pregnancy and deliver the baby in a health facility where they'll receive comprehensive care.
- Promote accountability from all sectors of government to deliver on national EVT targets.

