

Minutes
of
Policy and Advocacy Advisory Council Meeting: 22

The PAAC meeting was held online via Zoom platform on June 18, 2021 at 15:00.

Objectives:

- To present and discuss priority activities within the Global Fund's Covid-19 Response Mechanism (C19RM)
- To present and discuss two potential studies submitted for C15RM application by the Curatio International Foundation: (1) The impact of Covid-19 on the detection, treatment adherence and outcomes of TB patients; (2) The Impact of Covid-19 on the HIV Treatment Cascade and the Health System Response and Adaptation

Attendees:

<i>Mzia Tabatadze</i>	CCM Vice Chair
<i>Irma Khonelidze</i>	National Center for Disease Control and Public Health (NCDC), Deputy Director, PAAC member
<i>Ketevan Stvilia</i>	NCDC, GF HIV Program Manager
<i>Maia Uchaneishvili</i>	Curatio International Foundation
<i>Alexandre Asatiani</i>	NCDC, GF HIV Program M&E Specialist
<i>Nino Mamulashvili</i>	Program Coordinator, WHO Country Office Georgia, PAAC member
<i>Marine Gogia</i>	HIV program director, Georgia Harm Reduction Network, PAAC Member
<i>Beka Gabadadze</i>	CBO “Temida”, PAAC member
<i>Tony Sarasfati</i>	CBO “Temida”, PAAC member
<i>Otari Jijeishvili</i>	NGO “Fenix 2009”, PAAC member
<i>Nino Tsereteli</i>	Tanadgoma, PAAC member
<i>Mariam Jibuti</i>	NGO “New Vector”
<i>Davit Alkhazashvili</i>	Patients Union, PAAC member
<i>Dali Usharidze</i>	NGO “New Way”, PAAC member
<i>Nana Nabakhteveli</i>	LFA
<i>Irina Grzelidze</i>	CCM, Executive Secretary
<i>Natia Khonelidze</i>	CCM, Administrative Assistant
<i>Tamar Zurashvili</i>	PAAC, Policy and Advocacy Specialist

The meeting was opened by **Ms. Tamar Zurashvili**, Policy and Advocacy Specialist of the PAAC, who welcomed the attendees and introduced the purpose of the meeting. She noted that significant comments have been received on the C19RM Funding Request, which was presented and discussed at the previous committee meeting. The comments have been reflected accordingly and in order to present the changes incorporated into the application, she gave the floor to **Ms. Ketevan Stvilia**.

Ms. Ketevan Stvilia thanked the members of the Committee, representatives of international agencies and the Global Fund for reviewing the first draft of the application and for providing significant comments. All comments were taken into account and have been reflected in the updated application accordingly. She also noted that the application submission deadline has been postponed and the submission will take place on June 30, 2021. Ms. Stvilia noted that the main categories of the Covid-19 response mechanism have not changed. Changes have been made to the application timeline: if in the previous version the implementation deadline was set until the end of 2023, now it is up to the first 6 months of 2023. Regarding the application deadline, the Global Fund recommended to set it by the end of 2022. The main activities of the application will be completed by this period, and since the use of international procurement mechanisms for placing orders is often associated with extended delivery times, 6 months of 2023 will be used for delivery purposes, which in turn will ensure having supplies for 2023 as well. Ms. Stvilia then presented the procurements of medical equipment, reagents, and consumables planned under the Allocation by interventions (5 interventions in total: (1) Clinical Management of Covid-19, (2) Diagnosis of Covid-19, (3) Personal Protective Equipment, (4) strengthening laboratory systems, (5) medical materials and waste management. No funds will be requested under Allocation for the intervention - Strengthening Covid-19 Epidemiological Surveillance. She noted that quantities for each intervention have not changes significantly, mainly the prices were clarified and the adjusted budget for this component is \$ 1,958,014. Then she presented the total budgets requested for the same interventions under allocation and above allocation. Significant increase is observed only in the part of diagnostics at the expense of rapid tests (the requested amount is 2,700,000 USD), in addition the intervention - Strengthening Covid-19 Epidemiological Surveillance – falls under above allocation. The total amount is 6,013,500 USD. According to the Global Fund recommendation, the amount requested exceeds the total amount of the allocation. Regarding the latter, **Ms. Irma Khonelidze** noted that if after reviewing the applications submitted by all countries, some of them are not fully met and free resources appear, it will be possible to meet the additional needs of other countries. Then **Ms. Ketevan Stvilia** presented the section of services envisaged by the application. She once again thanked Ms. Maka Gogia and Ms. Tamar Zurashvili for ensuring community dialogue and providing detailed activities for these services. They were reflected in the application, submitted to the Global Fund, and in accordance with their recommendations, appropriate changes were made (mainly the technical parts were clarified, as well as minor budget adjustments made). It was emphasized that these activities should be aimed at assisting the management of urgent needs. The activities that were provided under the 2020 COVID grant and will be continued under the 2021-2022 allocation are as follows: (1) Support for the HIV Self-Testing Platform - no significant changes have been made in this part. It is noteworthy that the Global Fund is paying particular attention to the

development of alternative testing models, due to the reduced testing coverage under COVID conditions; (2) Support for the Teleclinic - this direction also remains unchanged, includes the services for 100 beneficiaries per month and the further enhancement of the model; (3) Computer support for online / remote activities - this direction also remains unchanged; (4) Social support – there are changes in this direction, which mainly concerns the number of beneficiaries (there will be about 100 beneficiaries per month) and consequent reduction of the budget. According to the Global Fund recommendation, only very critical needs will be met through this intervention. Inclusion criteria will be revised. An individual approach based on the case management principle will be used; (5) Postal delivery of ARVs.

Regarding the postal delivery of ARVs, **Ms. Mzia Tabatadze** asked how the temperature regimen is maintained during transportation and whether there are any problems in this regard (especially during the summer season).

Ms. Katevan Stvilia replied that none of the medications currently being delivered by post are child formula and therefore do not have any special storage conditions. Also, the shipping time is not long. It should also be noted that similar approach have been practiced in other countries with higher temperature than in Georgia. Ms. Stvilia thanked Ms. Tabatadze for this comment and noted that the issue will be further discussed with the AIDS Center and transportation conditions will be adapted if necessary.

Then **Ms. Stvilia** continued with presenting the interventions that are new to the application (not included in the C19RM 2020 application): (1) Technical assistance for development of SARS-CoV-2 sequencing strategy. (2) Training of medical personnel in management of COVID-19 and post-COVID syndrome - nothing has changed in this direction; (3) Information campaign and advocacy - also remains unchanged; (4) Detection of COVID-19 cases on the basis of community organizations - should be reflected in the National COVID-19 Testing Protocol and introduced after appropriate trainings; (5) COVID-19 Impact Assessment and Training on Community Rights and Gender Issues - also remains unchanged; (6) Prevention and Management of Gender-Based Violence, Establishment and Support of a Crisis Center – activity is maintained and the budget has been agreed with Global Fund; (7) Support of outreach services (purchase of scooters) – also remains unchanged. There are two new interventions for TB: (1) bi-directional screening for TB and COVID to ensure timely detection of TB, considering existing lag in the detection. Bi-directional screening of patients with respiratory symptoms will be performed using a computer program (CAD) (this is a kind of software that can detect both TB and COVID, it specifically detects radiological characteristic of both diseases and allows to make diagnosis). Institutions involved in the implementation of the FAST strategy will be engaged in bi-directional screening; (2) Active detection of COVID and TB cases in religious communities as part of the on-site screening program.

Ms. Tamar Zurashvili thanked Ms. Stvilia for presenting the changes made to the application and gave the floor to **Ms. Maia Uchaneishvili** to present two potential studies suggested for the application.

At the beginning of her presentation, **Ms. Maia Uchaneishvili** highlighted existing problems of detecting new cases of TB and HIV, both globally and locally. Therefore, it is important to study the impact of the pandemic by conducting relevant researches. The first research concerns TB and aims to assess the impact of Covid-19 on the detection of TB patients, as well as on treatment adherence and outcomes; also, how well the health care system is able to adapt to new needs and requirements. She then presented the rationale for the study: According to one modeling study conducted in 2020, the restrictions due to COVID pandemic will globally lead to an additional 6.3 million new TB cases and an additional 1.4 million TB deaths in 2020-2025. Ms. Uchaneishvili noted that local consultations with service providers also revealed some problems in detection, treatment adherence, and treatment outcomes that require further study and proper adaptation. The study proposed by the Curatio International Foundation will assess the following issues: What impact do Covid-19-related restrictions have on the TB program?; What effect do limitations have on the detection of new cases and treatment initiation?; What are the impacts and potential barriers to treatment adherence?; How did Covid-19 restrictions affect treatment outcomes?; What potential role can community organizations play in improving detection and treatment adherence? And what should the TB program do to reduce the impact of Covid-19 on TB prevention and treatment services? Then Ms. Uchaneishvili spoke about a second potential study on HIV. Here, she also presented the rationale for the study: Globally, 25% of HIV-infected people have stopped treatment for some period of time, and an additional 10% of patients receiving ARV treatment had no viral suppression due to the lack of viral load tests or insufficient frequency of tests conducted. Therefore, the pandemic may have an impact on the HIV cascade and it is important to study this impact as well. The same type of research is proposed here, to examine the impact of Covid-19 on HIV prevention, detection, treatment, treatment adherence, and system adaptation in general.

Ms. Ketevan Stvilia noted that both studies are very interesting, at the same time are specific and tied to clinical services. She therefore asked if there had been any prior communication with representatives of the AIDS and TB Centers in this regard, as their consent for conducting these studies would be very important in terms of data sharing, given that the NCDC does not have access to this data/information.

Ms. Uchaneishvili replied that no prior consultation on access to the data had been conducted yet. The importance of proposed study has been communicated with TB Center within the frames of other projects and they have expressed their interest and readiness. A consultation with the AIDS Center has not yet taken place. Ms. Uchaneishvili thanked Ms. Stvilia for her comment and noted that, if necessary, consultations on data sharing will be conducted with these two institutions.

Ms. Irma Khonelidze thanked Ms. Maia Uchaneishvili for the proposed researches and noted that it is desirable to assess the impact of the new approaches that have been implemented since 2020 as part of mitigation measures and to develop relevant recommendations for further improvement.

Ms. Nino Mamulashvili asked a question about the approximate time-frame of the studies and expected results.

Ms. Maia Uchaneishvili responded that this is a qualitative, secondary type of data analysis study; the estimated start time is not known yet, although the study is expected to take an average of 4-6 months.

Ms. Irma Khonelidze once again thanked Ms. Nino Mamulashvili for the important and useful comments provided by the World Health Organization regarding the C19RM proposal. They were considered accordingly in terms of laboratory, personal protective equipment, quality, as well as specifications. She also noted that there was a relative scarcity of interventions for TB in the first draft of the proposal. Both worldwide and in Georgia, the most dramatic problem is TB case detection, therefore interventions have been added to improve detection. According to the Global Fund recommendation, interventions should be covered through current grants to the extent possible (many areas related to the involvement of non-governmental / community organizations are covered under the current grant). Therefore, activities aimed at detection of new cases of TB, HIV and COVID are included in the C19RM proposal. Ms. Khonelidze also highlighted the fact that all comments provided and incorporated amendments were agreed with the PAAC Chair, Ms. Tamar Gabunia.

Ms. Maka Gogia asked about the deadline of GF final approval on the COVID-19 application.

Ms. Ketevan Stvilia replied that the review is likely to take place promptly and the expected start time of the grant is August 2021. She also introduced to the audience new, pilot intervention aimed at improving detection, which is planned under the COVID-19 application - testing the general population for HIV and hepatitis at the pharmacies (tests will be procured, staff will be trained and a place at the pharmacies will be set up for testing. The use/distribution of self-tests are also considered). Based on the pilot results, recommendations for its scale up will be developed.

Ms. Maka Gogia noted that the regional SoS project also plans to conduct meetings with pharmaceutical companies and large pharmacy chains regarding HIV self-tests (to be purchased and sold to the general population). It was agreed to coordinate with PR and jointly act regarding the activities planned for pharmacies.

At the conclusion, **Ms. Tamar Zurashvili** summarized the meeting and thanked the participants.

Next Steps:

- The final draft of the C19RM application will be circulated among PAAC members for agreement;
- The deadline for providing PAAC final comments was set at CBO June 23.

Minutes prepared by Tamar Zurashvili

Policy and Advocacy Specialist, PAAC