



U=U SHOWS HOW COMMUNITY-LED RESPONSES CAN CHANGE THE WORLD

Community-led activists have reshaped the world's understanding of HIV treatment and prevention and better aligned efforts to end AIDS as a public health threat with scientific evidence on the prevention benefits of antiretroviral therapy. Launched by the Prevention Access Campaign in 2016, the Undetectable = Untransmittable (U = U) movement set out to build an evidence-based consensus on the fact that a person living with HIV who has an undetectable viral load cannot transmit HIV sexually (1).

In the following years, leading medical journals and public health agencies endorsed U = U, prompting a number of jurisdictions to pursue a strategy of status-neutral approaches to HIV prevention. Today, U = U education is a core standard required of all countries supported by the Global Fund (2) and PEPFAR (3).

In 2022, the UNAIDS Programme Coordinating Board called on the Joint Programme to promote U = U as an evidence-based strategy for health equity and called on countries to incorporate U = U in national health plans and guidelines (4). In 2023, the World Health Organization built on 20 years of promoting the use of treatment as prevention to reconfirm that there is a “zero chance” of sexual transmission to the HIV-negative partner of a person living with HIV who has an undetectable viral load (5). In addition to influencing HIV prevention programming, U = U has been described as one of the most effective and historic counter-narratives to HIV stigma and an accelerator of each stage of 95–95–95 (6).

U = U shows how community-led responses can literally change the world. Since the Prevention Access Campaign, a small community-led group, first approached the United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in 2016 about changing its prevention guidance to emphasize U = U, the campaign has grown into a global grassroots movement, embraced by community-led organizations across the world.

“U = U belongs to everyone,” says Bruce Richman, the founding Executive Director of the Prevention Access Campaign. “It is a global community.”

Protests at International AIDS Society conferences increased awareness of U = U. Through social media and other means, community members spread the word, and the movement caught fire. Musical artists in Malaysia and Zambia have focused on U = U in their songs. Cartoons in China and children's songs in Japan promote U = U. Visual artists in Spain and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland have incorporated U = U in their artwork. The movement has become the focus of local organizing in countries in almost every region. Numerous Fast-Track Cities and national health ministries have leveraged the U = U movement as a centrepiece of strategies to end AIDS as a public health threat.

“A focus on the health and dignity of people living with HIV also contributes to the health and wellbeing of their partners, families and communities, and, in and of itself, should act as significant step towards HIV prevention,” says Florence Raiko Anam, Co-executive Director of GNP+. “All these community-led campaigns follow the science and communicate the science in a language that communities understand and can contextualize to their country experience. It's the resilience of communities to persistently change perceptions of health providers, policy-makers, governments, and general public despite limited resources and conservatism, and how U = U has become a central argument in national HIV responses in many countries.”

“U = U took off because for so long people living with HIV have been treated like vectors of disease,” Richman said. “U = U is giving us our full lives back, showing that we are able to have sex, to have intimacy, to have babies without fear. And now science proves that ensuring that we remain healthy is the key to end the epidemic.”

Excerpt from the UNAIDS “Let Communities Lead” World AIDS Day 2023 Report

1. Who we are and what we do. New York: Prevention Access Campaign (<https://preventionaccess.com>, accessed 12 September 2023). 2. HIV information note: allocation period 2023–2025. Geneva: Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria; 2022 (https://www.theglobalfund.org/media/4765/core_hiv_info_note_en.pdf, accessed 3 November 2023). 3. PEPFAR 2023 regional and country operational plan (COPROP) guidance for all PEPFAR-supported countries. Washington, DC: United States President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief; 2023 (<https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/PEPFAR-2023-Country-and-Regional-Operational-Plan.pdf>, accessed 3 November 2023). 4. Report of the Fifty-first Programme Coordinating Board meeting. Geneva: Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS Programme Coordinating Board; 2023 (https://www.unaids.org/sites/default/files/media_asset/PCB51_Report_Final_EN_Rev1.pdf, accessed 14 November 2023). 5. The role of HIV viral suppression in improving individual health and reducing transmission. Geneva: World Health Organization; 2023 (<https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240055179>, accessed 12 September 2023). 6. Report by the NGO representative: undetectable = untransmittable = universal access (U = U)—a foundational, community-led global HIV health equity strategy. Geneva: Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS Programme Coordinating Board; 2022 (https://www.unaids.org/sites/default/files/media_asset/PCB51_NGO_Report_Final_112322.pdf, accessed 3 November 2023).