

FAST-TRACKING URBAN PUBLIC HEALTH

The Fast-Track Cities network, originally established to accelerate urban responses to HIV/AIDS, has grown to tackle urban public health challenges across the Commonwealth.

In the bustling urban landscapes of Commonwealth countries, a city-focused network has successfully averted new HIV infections and AIDS-related deaths, while prioritising a rights-based social agenda, since its 2014 launch. The Fast-Track Cities network, originally focused on accelerating urban HIV responses, has transcended its original scope to also encompass efforts to eliminate urban hepatitis C virus (HCV) infections and avoid tuberculosis (TB) deaths, centered around the principle that a high tide can lift all boats.

In relation to HIV, the 500-plus Fast-Track Cities network has leveraged urban public health leadership in close to 100 Commonwealth cities around the world. These cities have achieved significant improvements in HIV treatment coverage, which has a dual effect of preventing disease progression and deaths among people living with HIV (PLHIV) and preventing new onward HIV infections. In Lagos, Nigeria, the percentage of PLHIV who knew their status and accessed treatment increased from 76% in 2015 to 89% by 2021. Moreover, eThekweni (Durban), South Africa, increased its treatment coverage from 77% of diagnosed PLHIV in 2018 to 90% in 2022. Social determinants of health and persistent stigma challenge our ability to further close HIV treatment gaps, which requires sustained efforts to shatter the status quo.

Several Commonwealth countries, including Australia, South Africa and the United Kingdom, host many Fast-Track Cities, in essence becoming Fast-Track Countries. This critical mass of Fast-Track Cities is enabling a national consortium effect with a measurable impact on scaling up HIV prevention services. Among these services is HIV pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP), which can prevent HIV-negative individuals from acquiring the virus and is an adjunct to HIV treatment in a combination HIV prevention approach. South Africa, which has 14 Fast-Track Cities, has seen an increase in PrEP use, from 168,538 in 2021 to 888,217 in 2023. Progress in PrEP uptake is uneven, however, with Fast-Track Cities in too many countries constrained by less than favorable environments, including lack of health financing to support universal PrEP access, requiring sustained advocacy to address political and commercial determinants of health.

Fast-Track Cities are also moving the needle towards HIV epidemic control. As a result of their efforts, many cities have

reduced their HIV incidence rates, or the estimated number of persons newly infected with HIV. Some cities have nearly halved HIV incidence in the span of a few years.

Kingston in Jamaica, which had 98 new infections per 100,000 population in 2018 saw a decrease in incidence to 56 new infections per 100,000 population in 2021; and Lusaka in Zambia saw a decrease in incidence from 2,312 new infections per 100,000 population in 2018 to 1,099 new infections per 100,000 population in 2022. While these successes are laudable, all cities (and countries) should be on a trajectory towards zero new HIV infections to realise our collective aspiration of attaining the United Nations goal of ending AIDS as a public health threat.

The Fast-Track Cities network's urban HIV outcomes extend beyond the increased use of biomedical interventions to curb HIV acquisition and transmission. Through partnerships between public health bodies and community-based organisations, we have witnessed the tangible changes public health and affected community leadership has brought about – from reducing HIV and intersectional stigma to implementing culturally competent person-centered care models. The network's success stories serve as a testament to the power of shared determination in the pursuit of ending HIV epidemics in urban settings – where two out of every three people are projected to live by 2050.

As the network prepares to commemorate its 10-year anniversary this year, Fast-Track Cities as diverse as Johannesburg, Kingston, London, Mumbai, Sydney and Toronto remain steadfast in their priority focus on reaching the last mile towards ending urban HIV and TB epidemics, alongside the elimination of HCV infection by 2030. This strategic commitment will ensure that the hard-fought gains achieved over the past decade within urban settings are sustained and advanced. By prioritising the last mile, the network



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Dr José M. Zuniga is President/CEO of the Fast-Track Cities Institute (FTCI) and International Association of Providers of AIDS Care (IAPAC), which is the core technical partner of the Fast-Track Cities network. Dr Zuniga joined IAPAC in 1997 and has served as its President/CEO since 2000. He is also a member of the IAPAC Board of Trustees, and an Editor Emeritus of the *Journal of the International Association of Providers of AIDS Care*.



Image: Shutterstock_632817764_Kampala skyline Uganda.

acknowledges the importance of inclusive HIV, TB and viral hepatitis responses, leaving no community behind. Simultaneously, Fast-Track Cities are aligning with the importance of advancing a broader urban public health approach, recognising the interconnectedness of diseases and the need for holistic strategies. This dual commitment reflects the Fast-Track Cities network's dedication to achieving health equity and fostering resilient urban communities in the pursuit of global health targets.

Leveraging its past achievements across HIV, TB and viral hepatitis responses, the Fast-Track Cities network is poised to achieve a wider range of global public health goals. Whether eliminating cervical cancer as a public health threat by 2030, saving 2.5 million lives from breast cancer deaths by 2040 or ensuring a 20% increase in service coverage for mental health conditions by 2030, the network prepared to redefine urban approaches to myriad health challenges. Strategic partnerships, including between Fast-Track Cities, Fast-Track Countries, Commonwealth countries and the Commonwealth Secretariat, can help to leverage urban public health leadership to realise the right to health for all.

In the face of accelerating global urbanization trends, directing health responses towards cities is of paramount relevance due to an undeniable urban advantage. Cities, as hubs of economic, social and cultural activities, play a pivotal role in shaping public health landscapes. Moreover, the concentration of population in cities facilitates targeted interventions and efficient resource allocation, leading to swifter responses to health challenges. By focusing on cities, health initiatives such as Fast-Track Cities are harnessing the benefits of interconnected urban networks, enabling rapid dissemination of health-promoting information and implementing health and other innovations. Recognising cities as strategic focal points enhances the effectiveness of health responses, contributing to the overall well-being of urban populations and, consequently,

making significant strides towards achieving national and global health goals.

Parliamentarians play a crucial role in shaping and advancing public health policies, enacting laws that promote public health, allocating resources for healthcare systems and providing oversight of existing health policies. Parliamentarians across the Commonwealth can partner with Fast-Track Cities to create enabling environments for public health by ensuring laws and policies, as well as resources, address the specific needs of communities affected by communicable and non-communicable diseases. Examples of such actions include reforming laws that perpetuate social injustice, passing legislation aimed at reducing health disparities and advancing regulatory measures for health promotion. As important, All-Party Parliamentary Groups (APPGs) and parliamentary caucuses also have a crucial role to play in facilitating cross-party collaboration and unity in strengthening urban public health responses, while also engaging with counterparts in other countries to address cross-cutting public health challenges.

At the core of the Fast-Track Cities network's mission lies a value that resonates with the mission of the Commonwealth, namely solidarity. Collaboration and shared responsibility are not just operational buzzwords but the very essence of the network's impact over the past nine years. As we approach the mid-term to the health-related UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) deadline of 2030, solidarity must be the driving force behind efforts to achieve health for all in every city of the world, ensuring that no one is left behind in the pursuit of a more equitable world.

To find out about the Fast-Track Cities Institute please visit www.ftcinstitute.org. Email jzuniga@iapac.org or jzuniga@ftcinstitute.org to learn more about or engage with the network on HIV or other health responses, respectively.