

Exploring health provider knowledge of the Undetectable equals Untransmittable (U=U) concept in Central America

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Central American health providers consider U=U to benefit clients' quality of life and prevent new diagnoses. However, some providers misunderstand the concept and fear STIs transmission.

Background

The USAID HIV Care and Treatment Project, led by IntraHealth International, provided technical assistance to 36 HIV clinics in Central America to achieve the 95-95-95 goals between 2019 and 2023.

Regarding the third 95, in Q3FY23 project-supported clinics in Central America reached **94.72% viral load suppression**, positioning the region at a key moment to reinforce the Undetectable=Untransmittable (U=U) concept.

Figure 1. Number of participants by country

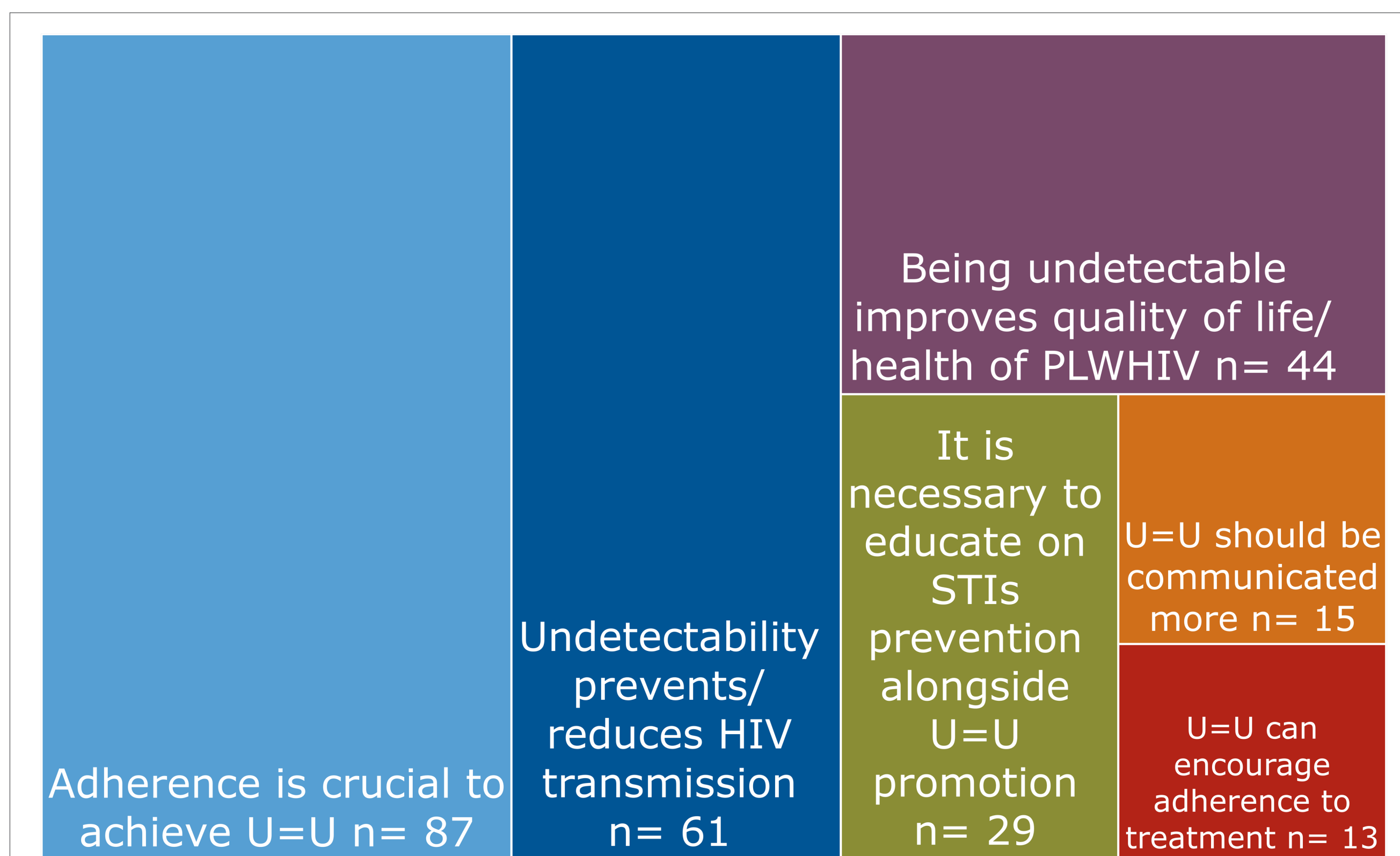


Description

In 2023, the project carried out a survey on U=U among project-supported health workers at HIV clinics, to identify gaps in their knowledge and explore their perceptions on the concept. It included **open-ended questions** about the meaning of U=U and participants' opinions on it, **and closed questions** about key definitions like undetectable, untransmittable, and the use of barrier methods according to viral load values.

173 participants from different professional backgrounds (medical doctors, nurses, psychologists, and social workers, among others) answered the online survey.

Figure 2. Most frequent themes that emerged from the question: What is your opinion on the U=U concept?



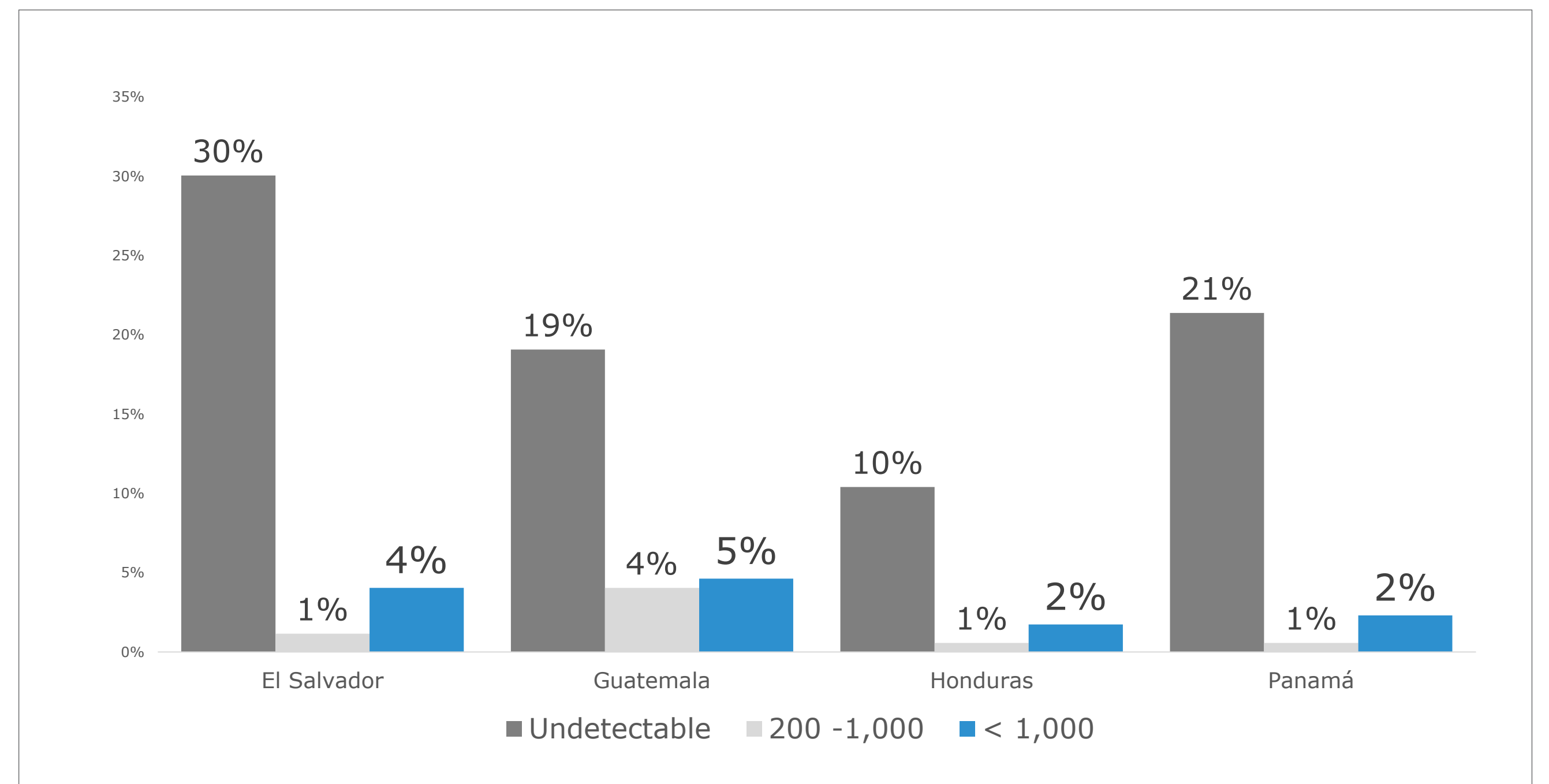
Lessons Learned

Relating to participants' opinions on U=U (see Figure 2), they mentioned that adherence is central to achieve undetectability and that the U=U message can improve adherence; that undetectability reduces HIV transmission; and that it improves clients' quality of life. Moreover, some health workers expressed the opinion that U=U should be discussed more. But others expressed concern that transmitting this concept could lead to an increase in sexually transmitted infections (STIs) (see quote below).

Furthermore, respondents showed confusion between the definitions of viral load suppression, undetectable, and untransmittable. For instance, **80% of participants answered that only people with an undetectable viral load do not transmit HIV** (see Figure 3).

"I believe that [U=U] is very beneficial for the future of patients, because it allows them to have children and achieve their life goals, of course with great care and close monitoring. But it is also an issue that must be handled carefully because, under the incorrect concept, it can lead to the transmission of STIs." –Health worker from Panama

Figure 3: From which viral load value can one affirm that PLWHIV do not transmit HIV?



Conclusions/Next Steps

- The survey showed the importance of training and sensitizing all health personnel in the timely and correct dissemination of the U=U concept so that it can be discussed along the continuum of care.
- Literature shows that clients with viral load values between 1,000 and 50 copies/ml do not transmit HIV (WHO, 2023)¹; however, these values represent the risk to develop future virological failures, stressing the importance of reinforcing adherence and aiming toward an undetectable viral load.
- It is crucial that providers use simple language, visual materials, and implement a comprehensive counseling approach that includes STIs prevention messages when explaining the viral load and U=U concepts, regardless of the client's viral load value.

¹World Health Organization. (2023). The role of HIV viral suppression in improving individual health and reducing transmission: policy brief. World Health Organization. <https://iris.who.int/handle/10665/360860>.

