INTRODUCTION
In 2018, UNAIDS estimated that there has been a 57% increase in new HIV infections in Pakistan since 2010. People who inject drugs (PWID) represent a large portion of these new infections, and Pakistan lags behind in the 90-90-90 targets. For more than 5 years, Bridging the Gaps partners Nai Zindagi and Mainline have increased access to harm reduction and HIV services for PWID in Pakistan via ARV adherence units (AAUs). In 2019, Nai Zindagi managed to scale up this innovative programme through the Global Fund.

PROBLEM
It is estimated that PWID have an HIV prevalence of 38% in Pakistan; it is less than 1% among the general population. In 2013, only 5% of the 2,151 PWUD living with HIV could be linked to ART clinics in Nai Zindagi’s programme. This low level of access was caused by limited geographical coverage, absence of opioid substitute treatment (OST), and the compromised lifestyle associated with drug use. Furthermore, a lack of adherence support and available detoxification for PWID posed major challenges for treatment coverage; clinicians recommended a 2-week detoxification service prior to ART initiation, but these services were mostly absent or of very low quality. Innovation was required to reach the other 95% with lifesaving services, such as ART. The Global Fund had indicated they would only invest in evidence-based interventions that were shown to be effective, which led to the pilot of the AAUs by Mainline and Bridging the Gaps.

CHANGE
The AAUs developed in 2014, increased access and adherence to ART for PWID. The AAU is a residential rehabilitation facility for PWID that combines treatment for opioid dependence with HIV treatment adherence support. By 2019, the AAU had treated 6,364 PWUD living with HIV with an adherence rate of 70%. By 2019, 64% of identified PWUD living with HIV were linked to ART by Nai Zindagi. In 2019, Nai Zindagi and Mainline also developed and studied innovations on follow-up support and re-initiation of the AAU. As a result, 1,921 ex-AAU clients were re-integrated into the programme, which led to an ARV adherence rate of 78%.

In 2019, the Global Fund augmented the harm reduction programs in Pakistan with additional funding of US$5 million. This included a further scale up of the AAUs, which were expanded from 30 to 44 districts under the new funding, based on the successes achieved by the pilot. The Global Fund has also increased Pakistan’s HIV envelope from US$35 million for 2018-2020 to US$71.5 millions for 2021-2023.

1 IBBS IV - Pakistan 2011

Bridging the Gaps is an international HIV programme with a focus on the health and rights for LGBT people, sex workers and people who use drugs, currently operating in fifteen countries. For more information on the programme, visit www.hivgaps.org.
CONTRIBUTION
The uptake of the AAU by the Global Fund was made possible after a continuous circle of piloting, testing, evaluating and improving the AAU. Mainline and Bridging the Gaps provided support, especially with flexible funding, that allowed Nai Zindagi to make adaptations quickly to improve the AAUs. Nai Zindagi is an organisation with strong financial systems, transparency and possesses a robust monitoring and evaluation system. These strong organisational capacities were supported through Mainline and Nai Zindagi’s partnership, and increased Global Fund’s confidence in the AAUs.

In collaboration with Mainline, Nai Zindagi arranged for an external evaluation of the AAU program in 2016. Because of the successes outlined in the evaluation - such as the overall adherence rate of 77.4% for those enrolled in the AAU compared to 51.1% among those not enrolled - Nai Zindagi managed to convince the Global Fund to support the AAU from January 2016 in the first round of scale up. This in turn led to another round of Global Fund funding in 2019.

ANALYSIS
The scale up from the Global Fund has had a huge impact on the lives of PWID in Pakistan. Nai Zindagi is able to more effectively link PWID to ART, and graduates of the AAU are adhering to treatment. AAU attendees are 43-51 times more likely to be adherent to ART in a period of 7-19 months after treatment initiation as compared to the non-AAU clients. This leads to better management of HIV and better health for PWID.

Having both treatment for opioid dependence and HIV services in one place makes them more accessible for PWID. The scale up by the Global Fund ensures that Nai Zindagi can continue providing these lifesaving treatments to PWID in Pakistan even after the end of Bridging the Gaps in 2020.

“...we have been very willing to pick up innovations from Mainline and Nai Zindagi and scale up. There are not many ideas available that have been tested effectively; it doesn’t grow on trees...It achieved impact with a small fund.”

– Global Fund representative

LOCKING AHEAD
Data and evidence, sometimes in the form of pilot projects, is essential in securing scale-up by large actors such as the Global Fund. With strong monitoring and evaluation systems, Nai Zindagi was able to build an evidence-base around each programme and each innovation, including the AAU pilot. In addition, technical leadership and strong organisational management allowed Nai Zindagi to become a pioneer in research, implementation and innovation of services for PWID.

Nai Zindagi estimates that the 2019 scale up by Global Fund will reach 8,000 additional clients in 2020. In the future, to improve the physical access for these services, decentralized AAUs could also serve as outpatient care facilities. Mainline and Nai Zindagi will continue to advocate the government to implement national OST programmes, which would be a significant milestone, and government and the relevant authorities have traditionally pushed back against them. Unfortunately, domestic funding for HIV and harm reduction services in Pakistan is still minimal; increasing this would significantly improve progress towards the 90-90-90 targets.

PERSONAL STORIES
Below are some personal quotes from the clients attending or who have attended an AAU:

“I restored my confidence here at AAU. People often are unable to differentiate HIV and AIDS. The residential program taught me so much, I gained hope. I wish to re-join my family when I go back and I am hopeful that it would be achievable with the help of staff here.”, says Asfand.

Nadeem shared “There is a lot of stigma related to HIV in our society, I was also afraid but all the fears vanished when I became part of Nai Zindagi. It’s a stigma free environment where I get the opportunity to seek support from others like me. More people should join the cause especially newspapers and media should do positive work for HIV.”