



**Rakai Health
Sciences Program**
Improved Health Through High Impact Research

STRATEGIC PLAN

2024-2029

RAKAI HEALTH SCIENCES PROGRAM

Improved Health Through High Impact Research.



Rakai Health Science Program
<https://www.rhsp.org/>



https://x.com/_RHSP



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Acronyms

CAB	Community Advisory Board
CDC	Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
DOD	Department of Defense
MDAs	Ministries, Departments, and Agencies
MOUs	Memorandum of Understanding
NCDs	Non-Communicable Diseases
NIH	National Institutes of Health
PEPFAR	U.S. President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief
RCCS	Rakai Community Cohort Study
RHSP	Rakai Health Sciences Program
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
STD	Sexually Transmitted Diseases
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
VHTs	Village Health Team
WHO	World Health Organization



Message from the

Chairperson Board of Directors

Colleagues,

I am privileged to unveil the 2024-2029 strategic plan for the Rakai Health Sciences Program (RHSP).

RHSP has come a long way in HIV and reproductive health research. Our findings over time have informed HIV epidemiology and have had a significant contribution to guiding national and international policies for HIV prevention, care, and treatment. These achievements would never have been possible without the strong support from our funders, partners, collaborators, and communities; for this, we are ever grateful. As the dream of HIV epidemic control increasingly becomes a reality, the need to reach all population sub-groups with services and organize for sustainability increases to be an inescapable reality for realizing that dream. At the same time, the population on HIV treatment will continue to increase, and the long-term effects of treatment will need to be managed. Further, we need to be cognizant of the fact that the epidemiology of HIV in Africa

has changed over time, and this will require a readjustment of our prevention and care strategies. In addition, we recognize the existential threat to HIV epidemic control by pandemics, urbanization, migration, climate change, and other global security concerns.

Against this backdrop, this strategic plan expands our research portfolio to encompass the future threat to HIV epidemic control, in particular emerging and re-emerging national and global concerns that threaten the health of communities. We commit to bold innovations anchored in diverse global partnerships, strengthened human resources, and infrastructure to sustainably keep the pulse on the HIV epidemic.

I welcome you to join us on this journey as we build to improve the health of our communities through high impact research.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'S. M. M. M.', written in a cursive style.



Message from the Executive Director

I am excited for us to present the Rakai Health Sciences Program (RHSP) strategic plan 2024-2029 after months of bold discussions and stimulating work sessions based on careful consultations, research, and assessment of our achievements. This strategic plan is setting new aspirations for our work that will lead to improved health outcomes for individuals and households in the greater Rakai region, across Uganda, and globally.

In the process of implementing our core mandate over the past five years, we experienced some of the greatest public health challenges of our lifetime, including global health security threats like the COVID-19 and Ebola epidemics, as well as climate change impacts that led to nearly a year of floods followed by drought. We were concerned about the potential impact of these climatic changes on healthcare access and utilization, as well as participation in research programs. These threats tested our ability to swiftly

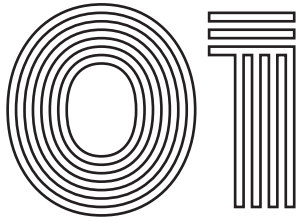
adjust our operations to ensure continuity of essential healthcare services including HIV treatment and prevention services. We were also challenged to proactively design and test innovations and build partnerships to deal with similar threats then and in the future. In this strategic plan, we position ourselves better to address such global and local health threats should they recur in 2024-29.

Our ability to integrate healthcare service programs with research for evidence generation has grown extensively in the past five years. We showed evidence for achievement of the UNAIDS 90-90-90 targets in our HIV surveillance cohort in the greater Rakai region and are on course to achieve the 95-95-95 targets. Meanwhile, our Rakai Community Cohort Study (RCCS) has cost-effectively provided evidence that combination HIV interventions are leading to dramatic reduction in new HIV infections in both

the general population and in HIV high-risk populations. In this strategic plan, we propose to sharpen our abilities to provide evidence for several at-risk sub-populations to inform efficient resource allocation for HIV treatment and prevention. We are one of the few programs that can provide these types of evidence. We thank members of the RHSP board for their foresightedness, our partners, including the local district governments, the Ministry of Health, local and international collaborators, and funding agencies. We have learnt a lot from each other, and I look forward to continuing collective learning. Special

thanks to the RHSP staff and volunteers; as I have always indicated to you *“we have come from far with improving people’s health, but where we are going is even further”*. Finally, I thank everyone who engaged in this strategic planning process, shaping the contents of the plan, and enabling the rollout of a dynamic guide for the future of our people. I welcome your continuing participation.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Mufan', with a horizontal line underneath the name.



Introduction

Our Foundation

The Rakai Health Sciences Program was founded in 1987 (as the Rakai Project) to conduct research leading to interventions to mitigate the then-raging HIV epidemic. Our work was informed by strategies guided by a vision, mission, and values which will be strengthened over the period 2024-2029.

1.1 Vision

Improved health through high-impact research.

RHSP envisions improving the health of the population it serves through excellent service delivery informed by research in HIV and non-communicable diseases.

1.2 Mission

To be the lead at improving population health through generating and translating knowledge to inform policy and service delivery.

1.3 Core Values - TIPIE

- 1.3.1 Teamwork:** Leveraging the unique strengths of individuals and partners to deliver our mission.
- 1.3.2 Innovation: Creativity to add value** in health research and service delivery
- 1.3.3 People-Centredness:** Responsiveness to community health needs.
- 1.3.4 Integrity: Accountability, honesty and strong moral principles**
- 1.3.5 Equitable collaboration:** Working together with partners in research, service delivery, and training.

1.4 Overview of the Strategic Plan

Rakai Health Science Program (RHSP) has over 30 years of experience conducting research and providing services on infectious diseases with a strong bias toward HIV. The research has been largely conducted through the Rakai Community Cohort Study (RCCS) — one of the world's longest-running population cohort-based research programs. The high-impact research has guided public health policy and practice on HIV prevention, care, and treatment. However, the evolving HIV epidemic and emerging and re-emerging global health threats, including pandemics, climate change, rapid urbanization, migration, and environmental degradation, necessitate a robust strategy that will see the organization remain relevant to the local and global community.

This strategic plan defines the direction RHSP shall take to achieve its vision and provides guidance and a framework for the use of resources over the next 5 years. The key perspectives of this strategic plan are aligned with the National research priorities, and global initiatives such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG).

Development of the strategic plan

This strategic plan was developed through consultations with multiple stakeholders including local and central government, development partners, collaborators from local, and international Universities, RHSP staff and the community.

1.5 Organizational context

The RHSP is a not-for-profit health research and service organization with a focus on community-based research, treatment, and prevention of HIV and other communicable diseases. The RHSP was first established as the Rakai Project in 1987 to investigate the epidemiology of HIV/ AIDS first identified in East Africa. It was later expanded in 1995 into a cohort (RCCS) to conduct a community randomized trial of sexually transmitted diseases (STD) Control for HIV Prevention. Over the years, RCCS has provided a platform for carrying out numerous nested studies of prevention interventions, health services, clinical and social behavioral studies, and basic science including phylogenetics, immunology, the genital microbiome, and HIV reservoir.

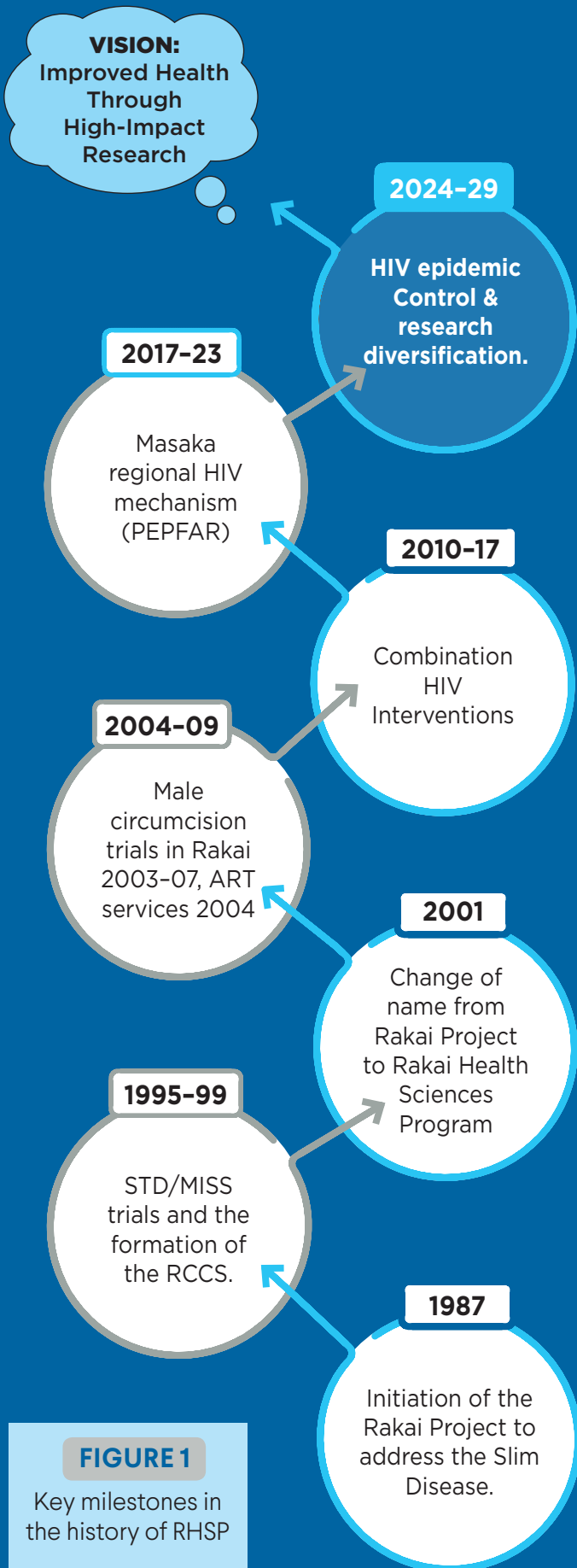


FIGURE 1

Key milestones in the history of RHSP

1.6 Main activities

The organization's main activities are research and service programs.

- 1. Research:** RHSP has made significant and impactful achievements to research. Such achievements have included; **the discovery of viral load as the primary driver of HIV transmission, male circumcision as a cost-effective HIV prevention strategy and the high impact of combination HIV interventions on reduction of HIV incidence at population level.** Despite the achievements, HIV epidemic control remains a challenge with disparities across various population subgroups. In addition, the rise in global health threats including pandemics, climate change, rapid urbanization, migration, and environmental degradation have the potential to reverse the HIV epidemic control gains and adversely affect a range of other health outcomes.

In the next five years, the RHSP purposes to diversify its research to address these global health threats and mitigate their potential adverse consequences on the HIV epidemic and other health outcomes.

2. Services: The RHSP significantly increased its scope in service delivery to cover a wide-range of HIV prevention, care and treatment services including related co-morbidities (such as cervical cancer) across the 12 districts of greater Masaka region (including Rakai) with support from PEPFAR. However, currently, RHSP focuses its service programs at its center of excellence located at its headquarters in Kalisizo, (Kyotera district) which is part of the greater Rakai. Services at the center of excellence have been scaled up among children, adolescents, women, and men including priority and key populations. However, inequities in service coverage across subpopulations, and the rise in non-communicable diseases (NCDs) in the aging population under HIV care are growing concerns. In addition, sustaining HIV service programs is an ever-increasing challenge given limitations in funding and inadequate integration into the mainstream healthcare system.

The RHSP purposes to engage with other partners to deliver people-centered services to eliminate disparities and mainstream HIV services into the broader health system. We will also leverage our expertise in research to conduct implementation sciences research to inform policies on models of care and integration of NCDs and HIV services into the health system.



Pillars of The Strategic Plan & The Strategic Direction

Pillar 1: Responsive research and translation

RHSP shall continue to conduct high-impact research on HIV and related infections and extend its research to a broader range of infectious diseases, NCDs, impact of climate change on health, and emerging local and global health issues.

Strategic Objective: To strengthen the diversification of the research portfolio consistent with the evolving HIV/AIDS epidemic, other emerging and re-emerging global health threats, and NCDs relevant to both the local and global community. Three strategies (**Box 1**) will guide this strategic objective for Pillar 1.

BOX 1

Strategies and key activities under Pillar 1.

Strategy 1: Develop and implement a research agenda.

Key activities

- i. To identify local and international research priority areas.
- ii. Respond to funding opportunity announcement aligned with the research agenda.

Strategy 2: To Promote impact evaluation and implementation sciences research.

Key activities

- i. Support evaluation of the impact of national and sub-national health programs
- ii. Identify and participate in relevant research networks.

Strategy 3: Develop and implement a research translation framework.

Key activity

- i. Identify and regularly engage key policy champions to promote research utilization in Ministries, Departments, and Agencies (MDAs)

Pillar 2: Disease prevention and care

Strategic Objective: To promote enhanced innovative service delivery models.

RHSP shall continue to seek opportunities to further strengthen the application of key research findings to service delivery

and training, to improve the health of individuals and communities which it serves; information about the results of such data-driven service delivery will be disseminated to help guide local, national, and regional policies and programs. Three strategies (**Box 2**) will guide this strategic objective for Pillar 2.

BOX 2

Strategies and key activities under Pillar 2.

Strategy 1: Strengthen the use of data to inform service delivery.

Key activities

- i. Strengthen data quality systems to ensure high-quality data.
- ii. Regular and targeted data review on key service performance indicators.

Strategy 2: Optimize scale-up of high-impact practices aligned to national guidelines.

Key activities

- i. Involve communities to guide implementation of people centered services.
- ii. Conduct implementation sciences research to evaluate and inform service delivery.

Strategy 3: Strengthen sustainable integrated health services delivery.

Key activities

- i. Conduct health systems research on innovative strategies to integrate HIV services into the mainstream health system.

FIGURE 2

RHSP health workers delivering medical supplies across a flooded road.



Pillar 3: Strategic partnerships and infrastructure strengthening

The RHSP shall identify, build, and strengthen strategic partnerships and collaborations, at the local, national, regional, and international levels, to leverage mutual strengths and improve individual, community-level, national, and global health. The partnerships shall be aligned to the desired research areas.

Strategic Objective: Establish and strengthen transformative partnerships and infrastructure to support research, training, and service delivery.

The RHSP has longstanding partnerships at community, national, and international levels that have strengthened her infrastructure and human resource capacities to conduct impactful research and implementation of health services across all the program’s operational areas. However, the research and service needs are rapidly evolving requiring RHSP to

expand her partnerships correspondingly to include more local, regional, south to south and private partnerships that align with the RHSP core mandate.

Additionally, some of RHSP’s key supportive infrastructure currently includes a dedicated ICT infrastructure and a state-of-the-art laboratory with a specimen repository, clinical space, reliable power backup, e-data collection capabilities, a secure relational database repository for the storage and easy retrieval of longitudinal data across multiple surveys (DataMart). However, the anticipated new directions in research, training, and service delivery may require new forms of technologies for diagnostics, information systems/ICT, monitoring, and surveillance technologies among others. The RHSP plans to strengthen its infrastructure capabilities to align with the anticipated needs.

Three strategies (**Box 3**) will guide this strategic objective for Pillar 3. **Figures 3 and 5** represent some of our past and ongoing partnerships. **Figure 4** shows the field laboratory at Kalisizo. **Figure 6** shows part of our infrastructure.

BOX 3

Strategies and key activities under Pillar 3.

Strategy 1: Increase the visibility of the Rakai Health Sciences Program core mandate.

Key activities:

- i. Improve dissemination of RHSP research findings.
- ii. Enhance community engagement.

Strategy 2: Identify, develop, and engage relevant partners to support the establishment and transfer of appropriate technology.

Key activities:

- i. Map relevant local, North-south, South-South, regional, and private sector.

- ii. Develop and implement an engagement strategy and relevant MoUs.

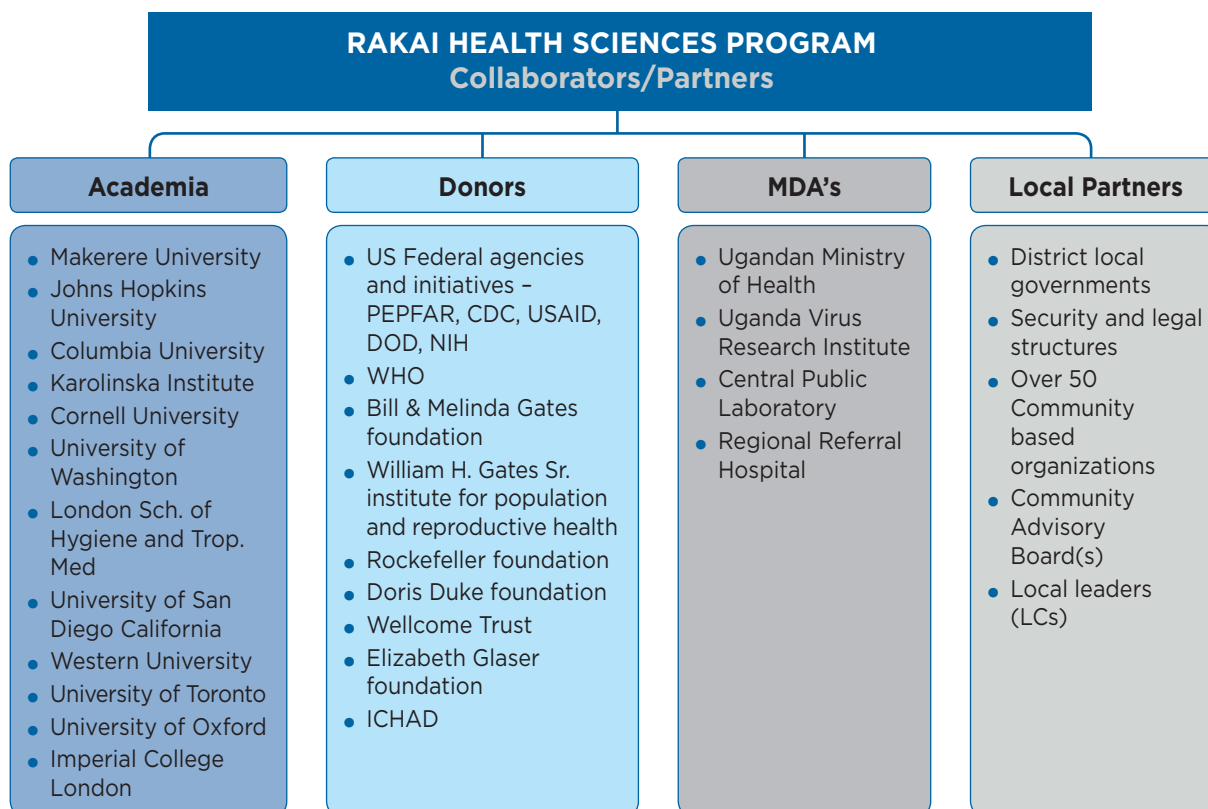
Strategy 3: To strengthen resource mobilization to sustain RHSP's research and services.

Key activities:

- i. Enhance capacity of Ugandan Investigators to seek research funding working collaboratively with international investigators.
- ii. Establish and strengthen local financing from non-grant sources.
- iii. Engage past and current RHSP partners and philanthropists for continual funding support.

FIGURE 3

Some of the RHSP past and present partnerships





← **FIGURE 4**

The RHSP laboratory at the Kalisizo field site.

FIGURE 5

Some of the RHSP partners meet at its commemoration of 30 years of existence.



FIGURE 6

Server room with liquid emersion cooling system; laboratory; data management; power backup.

Pillar 4: Training and mentorship

Through various training grants, RHSP has supported training of over 150 Ugandan scholars for their undergraduate and graduate degrees. In addition, over 120 international scholars have used research data from Rakai to complete their master's and doctoral theses under several training grants and scholarships. RHSP also conducted periodic training and mentorships of health workers and village health team members (VHTs) across 196 facilities within the greater Masaka region. Despite the training achievements, new research and service directions require widening of the scope and depth of such trainings. In addition, RHSP would like to transform its training infrastructure into a center of excellence to provide training in research and services for national, regional, and international scholars and active practitioners.

Strategic Objective: Establish a self-sustaining training infrastructure and strengthen RHSP human resources to support RHSP's core mandate.

One strategy (**Box 4**) will guide this strategic objective for Pillar 4. Figures 7, 8 and 9 show some of the training activities conducted at the RHSP facilities.

BOX 4

Strategies and key activities under Pillar 4"

Strategy 1: Transform the RHSP training infrastructure into a center of excellence in research and service delivery training.

Key activities:

- i. Create MOUs with training Institutions.
- ii. Design and implement field training course curricula and mentorship guidelines.
- iii. Design and implement a structured training and mentorship policy for staff advancement.

FIGURE 7

Students from Makerere University School of Public Health and John Hopkins University Homewood campus at a field visit at RHSP, Kalisizo site



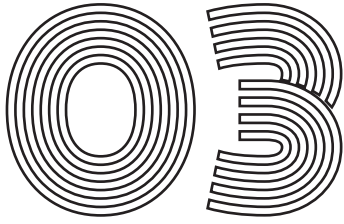
← FIGURE 8

Makerere University School of Public Health students with RHSP staff at one of the RCCS community field sites – 2021

FIGURE 9

Training on air quality monitoring for environmental health research





Critical Success Factors

Community engagement

RHSP's research and service programs are conducted among community members who provide the data and research samples and utilize evidence-based services. The RHSP directly holds regular village/town hall meetings to update community members on the research, health services, and other programs and also receive community feedback for improvement. The success and continuity of RHSP's core business is therefore anchored in working closely and collaboratively with the local community structures including community residents, village and other opinion, religious and traditional leaders, security and legal structures, and local governments. Additionally, these structures have been constituted into a 15-member community advisory board (CAB). The CAB advises on research and programs at inception, implementation, dissemination, and translation.

Supportive policy and legal environment

The RHSP conducts its core business within the prevailing legal and policy guidance. Our successful conduct and translation of research into policy and practice are highly dependent on the buy-in of local and international policymakers and favorable legal frameworks. The RHSP therefore assumes continued support from stakeholders including policymakers at all stages of research and service programs.

Social-political and economic environment

The social-political and economic environment are crucial for the conduct of quality research and delivery of health services. In the past, Uganda has

experienced several political instabilities including civil wars and displacement of populations that led to social and economic disruptions such as school closures, travel bans or curfews, and famine. Such circumstances are associated with the inability to conduct quality research and disrupt health service delivery which could lead to a resurgence of epidemics such as HIV, cholera, and an increase in mortality. Additionally, such circumstances may affect the functionality of RHSP infrastructure and human resources to conduct research and offer health services. The RHSP's core business is premised on a stable social-political and economic environment.

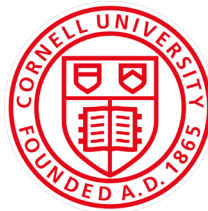
Access to appropriate, safe, and cost-effective technologies

The ability of RHSP to keep pace with and diversify its research and service delivery is highly dependent on local availability and access to appropriate modern technologies. Access to appropriate technologies will strengthen RHSP's capacity to conduct and diversify research and offer timely evidence-based health services delivery. The success of RHSP in diversifying its research will be dependent on the local transfer of needed technologies.

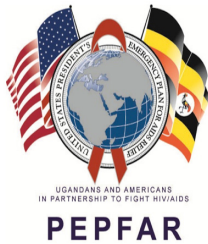
Our Current Partners



THE REPUBLIC OF UGANDA
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