

329 NGOs call on world leaders to address the global health and human rights crisis among people who use drugs on the occasion of the 26th International Harm Reduction Conference

As civil society and global experts gather in Porto for the 26th International Harm Reduction Conference, 329 NGOs are calling on the international community to address the ongoing global health and human rights crisis among people who use drugs.

The latest numbers on the HIV epidemic, just released by UNAIDS, are alarming. While global HIV incidence declined by 25% between 2010 and 2017, it is rising among people who inject drugs. Outside of Sub-Saharan Africa, people who inject drugs and their sexual partners continue to account for roughly one quarter of all people contracting HIV.¹ Globally, six in ten people who use drugs are living with hepatitis C, while 168,000 people who use drugs were reported to have died of an overdose in 2015 alone.²

There are just over ten years left to meet the international commitment to promote good health and well-being, reduce inequalities and provide access to justice for all by 2030, as enshrined in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In order to achieve these goals, strengthened political leadership at all levels is urgently required.

In 2011, the international community committed to halving the incidence of HIV among people who inject drugs by 2015.³ This target that was spectacularly missed by 80%, with the number of people who inject drugs contracting HIV increasing by one third over that period.⁴ As for the number of all drug-related deaths (counting overdoses, as well as those related to HIV, hepatitis and tuberculosis), these rose by a worrying 60% between 2009 and 2015, to reach an estimated 450,000 deaths in 2015. This represents 50 deaths every hour – deaths which are preventable. New commitments to address the global health crisis affecting people who use drugs were enshrined in the SDGs⁵ and reiterated in the Outcome Document from the 2016 UN General Assembly Special Session (UNGASS) on drugs.⁶ The 2019 Ministerial Declaration, agreed just a month ago in Vienna, calls on the international community to accelerate the implementation of these global commitments.⁷

However, without genuine leadership, these will be empty promises. It is imperative that efforts are stepped up worldwide to ensure that people who use drugs are front and centre in the global response. Today, although global coverage for HIV prevention, treatment and care services has improved for the general population, less than 1% of people who use drugs globally live in countries with high coverage of life-saving harm reduction interventions.⁸ Funding for HIV services directed at people who use drugs has also stagnated globally, and remains at only 13% of the estimated annual need.⁹ The funding gap is estimated to be close to 90% for all harm reduction interventions in low- and middle-income countries. Furthermore, people who use drugs continue to face a high level of stigma and discrimination in access to healthcare settings – as was recognised by 12 UN agencies in 2017.¹⁰

Even more concerning is the fact that people who use drugs often remain a ‘population under attack’.¹¹ Worldwide, one in five people is incarcerated for a drug offence, the overwhelming majority for simple possession.¹² Hundreds of thousands of people who use drugs are held in compulsory detention centres where they are denied healthcare and are victims of humiliations, physical and mental abuse and forced labour.¹³ At least 10 countries subject people who use drugs to corporal punishment including caning, whipping, lashing, stoning and even bodily mutilation – in some cases, even on children.¹⁴ In most regions of the world, people who use drugs are also victims of institutionalised violence, stigma and discrimination.¹⁵ Some of the most extreme cases of such repressive approaches can be found in the Philippines, with the recent surge in extrajudicial killings of suspected drug offenders. These unacceptable human rights abuses must come to an end.

At global level, we have serious concerns over the capacity of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) to lead on the global health response for people who use drugs.¹⁶

By its very mandate and construction, the UNODC remains an agency that is more attuned to the law enforcement response to drugs. Alarming, the agency is struggling to fully embrace, endorse and embody health and rights-based responses to drug policy. The UNODC's position on harm reduction remains several years behind that of other UN entities and important opportunities to incorporate harm reduction into the UNODC's work and projects continue to be missed – including in the recent efforts to respond to the global opioid crisis.¹⁷ While there have been important progressive initiatives and policy documents on harm reduction led by some UNODC staff and country offices, senior leadership at the Office has consistently failed to unequivocally champion harm reduction, human rights and decriminalisation and has too often remained silent in the face of some of the most egregious cases of human rights abuses faced by people who use drugs.

Without a serious change in the attitude and commitment from UNODC's leadership on harm reduction and drug policy reform, there would be no other choice than to reconsider the role of the UNODC as the leading UN agency on the health response towards people who use drugs. Because of the many concerns raised above, it may be time to consider whether progress might be better achieved under the direct lead of the office of the UN Secretary General, or through a different primary entity. In any case, and as we approach a leadership change for the UNODC, structural reforms within that entity should be considered to ensure stronger leadership on harm reduction, and closer cooperation with other UN agencies, as called for in the 2019 Ministerial Declaration and the United Nations System Common Position on global drug policy.¹⁸

Securing an improved health response for people who use drugs also requires strong political leadership at the national level.

Civil society has welcomed the United Nations System Common Position¹⁹ agreed at the highest decision-making level of the UN in November 2018 – and the convening of the UN System Coordination Task Team that produced a subsequent discussion paper 'What we have learned over the last ten years'.²⁰ Both documents – as well as the latest UNAIDS report 'Health, rights and drugs'²¹ – provide specific recommendations for more effective and humane national drug policies, including:

- The provision, scale up and funding for harm reduction interventions
- The decriminalisation of drug use and possession for personal use, as well as proportionate sentencing for all drug offences
- Ending stigma and discrimination against people who use drugs
- The inclusion, support and funding for, and empower of, communities and civil society organisations – including organisations and networks of people who use drugs.

The 26th International Harm Reduction conference held in Portugal this week will showcase the encouraging progress made by various countries which embrace these reforms, with direct impact on the lives of people who use drugs, their families and communities. There is still time to make significant, life-saving progress towards the 2030 targets – but the time to act is now. The UN System Common Position is an important step in the right direction, and its recommendations on harm reduction, decriminalisation, rights-based approaches and stigma must now be implemented by all governments with the support of a solid and coordinated UN system. But this will require genuine political will, leadership and action from the international community as a whole. Faced with the current crisis, complacency can no longer be tolerated.

List of signatory organisations

1. International Drug Policy Consortium
2. 1Tribe1Nation Consulting Services
3. A New PATH (Parents for Addiction Treatment & Healing)
4. AAFNO Nepal
5. Acción Semilla Bolivia
6. Acción Técnica Social
7. Action Jeunesse Maroc
8. AFEW International
9. African Network for the Prevention and Protection against Child Abuse and neglect
10. Agencia Piaget para o Desenvolvimento
11. AIDES
12. AIDS and Rights Alliance for Southern Africa
13. AIDS United
14. Aidsfonds
15. Aksion Plus
16. akzept e.V. Bundesverband für akzeptierende Drogenarbeit und humane Drogenpolitik
17. Alberta Addicts Who Educate and Advocate Responsibly
18. All Peoples' Encinitas Inc.
19. Alliance for Public Health
20. Ana Liffey Drug Project
21. Andean Information Network
22. Apoyo Positivo
23. Ares do Pinhal
24. Arewa Youth Trust Foundation
25. AS – Center for the Empowerment Youth of people who are living with HIV and AIDS in Serbia
26. Asia Catalyst
27. Asian Harm Reduction Network (AHRN Myanmar)
28. Asian Network of People who Use Drugs
29. Asociación Costarricense para el Estudio e Intervención en Drogas
30. Associació Reus Som Útils
31. Association de Défense des Droit Humains
32. Association de Lutte Contre le Sida
33. Association des intervenants en dépendance du Québec
34. Association for Safer Drug Policies
35. Association Guyanaise de Réduction des Risques
36. Association Hasnouna de Soutien aux Usagers de Drogues
37. Association HERA-XXI
38. Association Kéné Dougou Solidarité
39. Association Margina
40. Association Nationale de Réduction de Risques au Maroc
41. Association of Rehabilitation of Dependencies of Macau
42. Association Osons Parler de la Drogue au Mali
43. Association PROI
44. Association Québécoise des centres d'intervention en dépendance
45. Australian Injecting and Illicit Drug Users League
46. Auto-Support des Usagers de Drogues
47. BABSEACLE
48. Bensther Development Foundation Nigeria
49. BLM Memphis
50. Brazilian Drug Policy Platform
51. Broken No More
52. Cactus Montreal
53. CAFAC
54. Canadian Association of People who Use Drugs
55. Canadian Drug Policy Coalition
56. Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network
57. Canadian Students for Sensible Drug Policy
58. Cannabis Sans Frontières
59. Caring Ambassadors Program, Inc.
60. Caucasus Institute of Gestalt Therapy and Family Psychotherapy
61. CAZAS Montenegro
62. CCDAC
63. CEHURD
64. Center for Humane Policy
65. Center for Prisoner Health and Human Rights
66. Centre Associatif Polyvalent d'Aide Hépatite C
67. Centre des R.O.S.É.S. de l'Abitibi-Témiscamingue
68. Centre for Law Enforcement and Public Health
69. Centre for Research and Information on Substance Abuse
70. Centre for Research and Information on Substance Abuse
71. Centre Marocain Pour la sécurité et la Démocratie
72. Centre on Drug Policy Evaluation
73. Centre sida Amitié in Québec
74. Centro de Investigación Drogas y Derechos Humanos
75. Centro de Orientación e Investigación Integral
76. Children Education Society
77. Children's Education Foundation
78. Chunikhel society Nepal
79. CIRC
80. Citywide Drugs Crisis Campaign
81. Coalition des organismes communautaires québécois de lutte contre le sida
82. Coalition Marocaine de Droits à la Santé
83. Coalition Marocaine pour la Justice Climatique
84. Coalition PLUS
85. Coalition Sida des Sourds du Québec
86. Collectif Police Contre la Prohibition
87. Collectif Urgence Toxida
88. Comité Binacional de VIH y sida e ITS
89. Community Alliance Georgia
90. Conectas Human Rights
91. Corporación Humanas Colombia
92. Corporación Kimirina
93. Cultura Joven A.C.
94. Death Penalty Focus
95. Dee-Dee Stout Consulting
96. Dejusticia
97. Deutsche AIDS-Hilfe
98. Diogenes Drug Policy Dialogue
99. Dopamine
100. Drug Policy Action Group

101. Drug Policy Alliance
102. Drug Policy Australia
103. Drug Policy Network South East Europe
104. Drug Salvation Foundation
105. Drug User Advocacy League
106. Drug War Memorial
107. Drugs Peace Institute
108. Društvo AREAL
109. E-JOUSSOUR : Association des radios associatives et communautaire au Maroc
110. Eastern African Harm Reduction Network
111. ECHO Citoyen
112. ECPI-Euroregional Center for Public Initiatives
113. Ecumenical Advocacy Network on the Philippines
114. Elementa
115. Élixir
116. Empower India
117. Energy Control
118. Equal Health and Rights Access Advocacy Initiative Nigeria
119. Equis: Justicia para las mujeres
120. Estonian Network PLWHIV
121. Estudiantes por una Política de Drogas Bolivia
122. Estudiantes por una Política Sensata de Drogas Latinoamerica
123. Eurasian Harm Reduction Association
124. European Association for Palliative Care
125. European Network of People who Use Drugs
126. European Treatment Action Group
127. FAAAT
128. Fachverband Sucht
129. Family Drug Support Aotearoa New Zealand
130. Family Drug Support Australia
131. Father Bob Maguire Foundation
132. Federación Andaluza ENLACE
133. Fédération Addiction
134. Fedito BXL
135. Finnish Broadcasting Co
136. Fondazione Villa Maraini
137. Forum des alternatives Maroc
138. Forum Droghe
139. Frontline AIDS
140. Fundacao Oswabro Bruz
141. Fundación de Ayuda contra la Drogadicción
142. GAP-VIES Montréal QC
143. Gay Men's Health Collective
144. Geneva Platform on human rights, Health, and psychoactive substances
145. Georgia Harm Reduction Network
146. Georgia Red Cross Society
147. Georgian Network of People Who Use Drugs – For humane drug policy
148. Global Fund Advocates Network
149. Groupe d'Entraide à l'intention des Personnes Séropositives et Itinérantes
150. Groupement Romand d'Etudes des Addictions
151. Grupo de Ativistas em Tratamentos
152. HaliFIX Overdose Prevention Society
153. Harm Reduction Afghanistan
154. Harm Reduction Australia
155. Harm Reduction Coalition
156. Harm Reduction International
157. Harm Reduction Nurses Association
158. Hawai'i Health & Harm Reduction Center
159. Health GAP (Global Access Project)
160. Health Poverty Action
161. Healthy Options Project Skopje
162. Help Not Harm
163. Hep Free Hawai'i
164. Hepa+
165. Hepatitis C Mentor & Support Group, Inc.
166. Hepatitis Education Project
167. ICEERS
168. ICF "AIDS Foundation East-West"
169. India HIV/AIDS Alliance
170. Indonesian Harm Reduction Network
171. INSERM
172. Institute for Drug Control and Human Security
173. Instituto de Enseñanza para el Desarrollo Sostenible
174. Instituto para el Desarrollo Humano
175. Instituto RIA
176. Intercambios Civil Association
177. Intercambios Puerto Rico
178. International Center Women and Modern World
179. International Committee on the Rights of Sex Workers in Europe
180. International CURE
181. International Doctors for Healthier Drug Policies
182. International Federation of Non Governmental Organizations
183. International Indigenous HIV & AIDS Community
184. International Network of Nicotine Consumer Organizations
185. International Network of People Who Use Drugs
186. Ishonch va Hayot
187. Italian League for Fighting AIDS
188. Italian Network of People Who Use Drugs
189. Japan Advocacy Network for Drug Policy
190. John Mordaunt Trust
191. Juventas Montenegro
192. Kazakhs Union of People Living with HIV
193. Kenya AIDS NGOs Consortium
194. Kethea Exelixis
195. Latin American Network of People Who Use Drugs
196. Latinoamérica Reforma
197. Law Enforcement and HIV Network
198. Law Enforcement and HIV Network
199. Lawyers Collective
200. LBH Mayarakat
201. LEAP
202. LEAP UK
203. Legalize Belarus
204. Life Quality Improvement Organisation FLIGHT
205. Magazine Youth Group
206. MAHAMATE health care organization
207. Mahamate Myanmar
208. Mainline
209. Marborg
210. Médecins du Monde

211. Mexico Unido Contra la Delincuencia
212. Middle East and North Africa Network of People Who Use Drugs
213. MIELS-Québec
214. Moms Stop the Harm
215. Montenegrin Harm Reduction Network LINK
216. Mukikute
217. mumsDU – Moms united and mandated to saving the lives of Drug Users
218. Namibia Diverse Women's Association
219. NASTAD
220. National Alliance for Medication Assisted Recovery
221. National Organization for Women Foundation
222. National Users Network of Nepal
223. NC Survivors Union
224. Netherlands Drug Policy Foundation
225. New England User Union
226. New Vector
227. New Way, Center of Psychosocial Information and Counseling
228. New Zealand Drug Foundation
229. NGO Labyrinth
230. NGO Volunteer Tajikistan
231. Nigerian Network of People Who Use Drugs
232. NoBox Philippines
233. Nonviolent Radical Party, Transnational and Transparty
234. Normal Norway
235. NORML France
236. Norwegian Association for Humane Drug Policy (FHN)
237. Norwegian Association for People in OST (proLAR Nett)
238. Nova+
239. NSW Users and AIDS Association
240. Observatoire Marocain des Libertés Publiques
241. Observatoire Marocain des Prison
242. Observatorio de cultivos y cultivadores declarados ilícitos
243. ORFED
244. Organisation Marocaine des droits Humains
245. Pan African Positive Women's Coalition
246. Paroles Autour de la Santé (Mali, Côte d'Ivoire, Guadeloupe, Niger)
247. Partnership Network
248. Peer Based Harm Reduction WA
249. PeerNUPS
250. Penington Institute
251. PITCH Uganda
252. Pla d'accions sobre drogues de Reus
253. Polish Drug Policy Network
254. Portail VIH/sida du Québec
255. Positive Malaysia Treatment Access & Advocacy Group
256. Positive Voice the Greek Association of People Living with HIV
257. PREKURSOR Foundation for Social Policy Poland
258. Principes Actifs
259. Psychologists and Psychotherapists Association of Georgia
260. Public Justice Center
261. Re Generation
262. Real People Real Vision Georgia
263. Rede Brasileira de Redução de Danos e Direitos Humanos
264. Reframe Health and Justice
265. Release
266. Research, Education & Clinical Care for At Risk Populations
267. REVS PLUS
268. REZO
269. Rhode Island Drug User Union
270. Rights Reporter Foundation
271. Rise up America
272. Romanian Angel Appeal Foundation
273. Romanian Association Against AIDS
274. Romanian Harm Reduction Network
275. Rubiconi
276. Rumah Cemara
277. Safe Streets Arts Foundation
278. SAND – Homeless
279. Sankalp Rehabilitation Trust
280. SAOL Project
281. SATHI SAMUHA
282. Seattle Hempfest
283. Sidalys
284. SIFMA NOW!
285. Société canadienne de l'hémophilie – Section Québec
286. Society Association HIV.LV
287. SOS Addictions
288. South African Congress of Nonprofit Organisations
289. South African Network of People Who Use Drugs
290. St. Ann's Corner of Harm Reduction
291. Stella, l'amie de Maimie
292. Steps Non-Governmental Organisation
293. Stop Overdose Now
294. StoptheDrugWar.org
295. Streetworks
296. Students for Sensible Drug Policy
297. Students for Sensible Drug Policy, Sierra Leone
298. Support Foundation "RIGRA"
299. Table des Organismes Communautaires Montréalais de lutte contre le VIH/sida
300. Tanzania Network of Women Living with HIV and AIDS
301. TB/HIV Care Association
302. Temblores ONG
303. Tennessee Recovery Alliance
304. Teras Interventions & Counseling Inc.
305. Thunderbird Partnership Foundation
306. Transform Drug Policy Foundation
307. Transnational Institute - Drugs & Democracy programme
308. Treatment Action Group
309. Trystereo/New Orleans Harm Reduction Network
310. Uganda Harm Reduction Network
311. Unharming Ohio
312. UNITE Global Network of Parliamentarians to End HIV/AIDS, viral hepatitis and other infectious diseases
313. Urban Survivors Union

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| 314. Veterans for Medical Cannabis Access | 322. Women's Coalition Against Cancer |
| 315. Virginia Harm Reduction Coalition | 323. World Hepatitis Alliance |
| 316. Washington Office on Latin America | 324. Yamaka Youth Network |
| 317. We Help Ourselves | 325. Young Wave |
| 318. West Africa Drug Policy Network-Ghana | 326. Youth Organisations for Drug Action |
| 319. Western Harm Reduction Network | 327. Youth RISE |
| 320. White Noise Movement | 328. Zimbabwe Civil liberties and Drug Network |
| 321. Women for Health | 329. CBOH Плюс |

Endnotes

- ¹ UNAIDS (2019), *Health, rights and drugs: Harm reduction, decriminalization and zero discrimination for people who use drugs*, http://www.unaids.org/sites/default/files/media_asset/JC2954_UNAIDS_drugs_report_2019_en.pdf
- ² United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2018), *World Drug Report 2018*, <https://www.unodc.org/wdr2018/>
- ³ UN General Assembly (8 July 2011), *Resolution 65/277. Political Declaration on HIV and AIDS: Identifying our efforts to eliminate HIV and AIDS*, A/ RES/65/277, http://www.unaids.org/sites/default/files/sub_landing/files/20110610_UN_A-RES-65-277_en.pdf
- ⁴ UNAIDS (2018), *Miles to go: Closing gaps, breaking barriers, righting injustices*, http://www.unaids.org/sites/default/files/media_asset/miles-to-go_en.pdf
- ⁵ <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdg3>
- ⁶ Available here: <https://www.unodc.org/documents/postungass2016/outcome/V1603301-E.pdf>
- ⁷ Available here: https://www.unodc.org/documents/commissions/CND/CND_Sessions/CND_62/ECN72019_CRP11_V1901487.pdf
- ⁸ Larney S, Peacock A, Leung J, Colledge S, Hickman H, Vickerman P et al. Global, regional and country-level coverage of interventions to prevent and manage HIV and hepatitis C among people who inject drugs: a systematic review. *The Lancet*. 2017;5(12):PE1208–E1220
- ⁹ Harm Reduction International (2018), *The lost decade: Neglect for harm reduction funding and the health crisis among people who use drugs*, <https://www.hri.global/files/2018/09/25/lost-decade-harm-reduction-funding-2018.PDF>
- ¹⁰ UNAIDS, UNHCR, UNICEF, World Food Programme, United Nations Development Programme, UNFPA, UN Women, International Labour Organization, UNESCO, World Health Organization, United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, International Organization for Migration (2017), *Joint United Nations statement on ending discriminations in health care settings*, http://www.unaids.org/sites/default/files/media_asset/ending-discrimination-healthcare-settings_en.pdf
- ¹¹ Ibid.
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- ¹⁵ International Drug Policy Consortium (2018), *Taking stock: A decade of drug policy – A civil society shadow report*, <https://idpc.net/publications/2018/10/taking-stock-a-decade-of-drug-policy-a-civil-society-shadow-report>
- ¹⁶ The UN common position cites the 'lead coordinating role' played by UNODC, and states that the Task Team will be led by the Office. The 2019 Ministerial Declaration similarly reinforces UNODC as 'the leading entity of the United Nations system for addressing and countering the world drug problem', and UNODC also remains the lead co-sponsor for people who use drugs within UNAIDS
- ¹⁷ For instance, it is worrying that the latest UNODC opioid strategy does not include a harm reduction component, focusing instead on law enforcement. See: <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/opioid-crisis/index.html>
- ¹⁸ United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination (November 2018), *United Nations system common position supporting the implementation of the international drug control policy through effective inter-agency collaboration*, <https://www.unsceb.org/CEBPublicFiles/CEB-2018-2-SoD.pdf>
- ¹⁹ United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination (November 2018), *United Nations system common position supporting the implementation of the international drug control policy through effective inter-agency collaboration*, <https://www.unsceb.org/CEBPublicFiles/CEB-2018-2-SoD.pdf>

²⁰ UN System Coordination Task Team on the Implementation of the UN System Common Position on Drug-Related Matters (March 2019), *What we have learned over the last ten years*, https://www.unodc.org/documents/commissions/CND/2019/Contributions/UN_Entities/What_we_have_learned_over_the_last_ten_years_-_14_March_2019_-_w_signature.pdf

²¹ UNAIDS (2019), *Health, rights and drugs: Harm reduction, decriminalization and zero discrimination for people who use drugs*, http://www.unaids.org/sites/default/files/media_asset/JC2954_UNAIDS_drugs_report_2019_en.pdf