

300+ 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, 334 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 inject 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 2000 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 Andina Bolivia
6. Acción Semilla Bolivia
7. Acción Técnica Social
8. Action Jeunesse Maroc
9. AFEW International
10. African Network for the Prevention and Protection against Child Abuse and neglect
11. Agencia Piaget para o Desenvolvimento
12. AIDES
13. AIDS and Rights Alliance for Southern Africa
14. AIDS United
15. Aidsfonds
16. Aksion Plus
17. akzept e.V. Bundesverband für akzeptierende Drogenarbeit und humane Drogenpolitik
18. Alberta Addicts Who Educate and Advocate Responsibly
19. All Peoples' Encinitas Inc.
20. Alliance for Public Health
21. Ana Liffey Drug Project
22. Andean Information Network
23. Apoyo Positivo
24. Ares do Pinhal
25. Arewa Youth Trust Foundation
26. AS – Center for the Empowerment Youth of people who are living with HIV and AIDS in Serbia
27. Asia Catalyst
28. Asian Harm Reduction Network (AHRN Myanmar)
29. Asian Network of People who Use Drugs
30. Asociación Costarricense para el Estudio e Intervención en Drogas
31. Associació Reus Som Útils
32. Association de Défense des Droit Humains
33. Association de Lutte Contre le Sida
34. Association des intervenants en dépendance du Québec
35. Association for Safer Drug Policies
36. Association Guyanaise de Réduction des Risques
37. Association Hasnouna de Soutien aux Usagers de Drogues
38. Association HERA-XXI
39. Association Kéné Dougou Solidarité
40. Association Margina
41. Association Nationale de Réduction de Risques au Maroc
42. Association of Rehabilitation of Dependencies of Macau
43. Association Osons Parler de la Drogue au Mali
44. Association PROI
45. Association Québécoise des centres d'intervention en dépendance
46. Associazione Luca Coscioni
47. Australian Injecting and Illicit Drug Users League
48. Auto-Support des Usagers de Drogues
49. BABSEACLE
50. Bensther Development Foundation Nigeria
51. BLM Memphis
52. Brazilian Drug Policy Platform
53. Broken No More
54. Cactus Montreal
55. CAFAC
56. Campaña por la Descriminalización de las Personas Usuarias de Drogas en Bolivia
57. Canadian Association of People who Use Drugs
58. Canadian Drug Policy Coalition
59. Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network
60. Canadian Students for Sensible Drug Policy
61. Cannabis Sans Frontières
62. Caring Ambassadors Program, Inc.
63. Caucasus Institute of Gestalt Therapy and Family Psychotherapy
64. CAZAS Montenegro
65. CEHURD
66. Center for Humane Policy
67. Center for Prisoner Health and Human Rights
68. Centre Associatif Polyvalent d'Aide Hépatite C
69. Centre des R.O.S.É.S. de l'Abitibi-Témiscamingue
70. Centre for Law Enforcement and Public Health
71. Centre for Research and Information on Substance Abuse
72. Centre for Research and Information on Substance Abuse
73. Centre Marocain Pour la sécurité et la Démocratie
74. Centre on Drug Policy Evaluation
75. Centre sida Amitié in Québec
76. Centro de Investigación Drogas y Derechos Humanos
77. Centro de Orientación e Investigación Integral
78. Children Education Society
79. Children's Education Foundation
80. Chunikhel society Nepal
81. CIRC
82. Citywide Drugs Crisis Campaign
83. Coalition des organismes communautaires québécois de lutte contre le sida
84. Coalition Marocaine de Droits à la Santé
85. Coalition Marocaine pour la Justice Climatique
86. Coalition PLUS
87. Coalition Sida des Sourds du Québec
88. Collectif Police Contre la Prohibition
89. Collectif Urgence Toxida
90. Comité Binacional de VIH y sida e ITS
91. Community Alliance Georgia
92. Conectas Human Rights
93. Corporación Humanas Colombia
94. Corporación Kimirina
95. Cultura Joven A.C.
96. Death Penalty Focus
97. Dee-Dee Stout Consulting
98. Dejusticia

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

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

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| 314. Trystereo/New Orleans Harm Reduction Network | 323. West Africa Drug Policy Network-Ghana |
| 315. Uganda Harm Reduction Network | 324. Western Harm Reduction Network |
| 316. Unharming Ohio | 325. White Noise Movement |
| 317. UNITE Global Network of Parliamentarians to End HIV/AIDS, viral hepatitis and other infectious diseases | 326. Women for Health |
| 318. Urban Survivors Union | 327. Women's Coalition Against Cancer |
| 319. Veterans for Medical Cannabis Access | 328. World Hepatitis Alliance |
| 320. Virginia Harm Reduction Coalition | 329. Yamaka Youth Network |
| 321. Washington Office on Latin America | 330. Young Wave |
| 322. We Help Ourselves | 331. Youth Organisations for Drug Action |
| | 332. Youth RISE |
| | 333. Zimbabwe Civil liberties and Drug Network |
| | 334. СВОИ Плюс |

Endnotes

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² United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2018), *World Drug Report 2018*, <https://www.unodc.org/wdr2018/>

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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>

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¹⁴ Harm Reduction International (2011), *Inflicting harm: Judicial corporal punishment for drug and alcohol offences in selected countries*, https://www.hri.global/files/2011/11/08/IHRA_CorporalPunishmentReport_Web.pdf

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>

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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](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