

## THE UNGASS ON DRUGS IN 2016: A MILESTONE FOR HIV/AIDS NGOS POLICY IN AFRICA

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In 2016, the UN General Assembly will hold a Special Session (or ‘UNGASS’) on the issue of illicit drugs. People who inject drugs are a key population for HIV, with around 10% of global HIV infections linked to risky injecting practices. Much like the 2001 UNGASS on HIV/AIDS and the 2011 High-Level Meeting on AIDS, the UNGASS on drugs is crucial for the adoption of more effective and more humane policies.

Drug policy is an important issue for those working on the HIV response – we cannot hope to end AIDS until we end the global war on drug users. In order to do this, the voice of civil society around the world must be strong and united.

### DRUG INJECTION IN AFRICA

Data are limited, but the evidence clearly tells us that injecting drug use is a growing problem in Africa. The same risky practices that have driven HIV transmission in other parts of the world are being documented in Africa. Against the backdrop of existing high levels of HIV prevalence in many countries, this threatens to quickly undermine the achievements on the continent.

**Table 1: Estimated numbers of people who inject drugs and HIV prevalence, selected countries<sup>3</sup>**

Country	Estimated number of people who inject drugs	Estimated HIV prevalence among people who inject drugs
Egypt	85,000	6.5 – 6.8%
Kenya	49,167	18.3%
Mauritius	9,253	47.4%
Morocco	18,500	11.4%
South Africa	67,000	19.4%
Tanzania	25,000 – 50,000	42%

**Table 2: Needle sharing reported among people who inject drugs, selected countries<sup>4</sup>**

Country	Population	Needle sharing
Kenya	Injecting heroin users in Nairobi	28 – 52% (past 6 months)
Mauritius	Injecting drug users (IDUs)	80% (past 3 months)
Nigeria	Injecting heroin users	11 – 15% (past 6 months)
South Africa	Injecting heroin users in Cape Town	56 – 86% (past 30 days)
Tanzania	Female IDUs, Dar es Salaam	6% (no timeframe)
Tanzania	IDUs in Zanzibar	46% (ever)

### CRIMINALISING PEOPLE WHO USE DRUGS FUELS HIV EPIDEMICS

The current global drug control system is 100 years old, and has promoted the worldwide criminalisation of people who use drugs – the so-called “war on drugs”. There are many ways in which these repressive policies are driving HIV risks and transmission among people who use drugs:

<sup>1</sup> International Drug Policy Consortium (IDPC): [www.idpc.net](http://www.idpc.net)

<sup>2</sup> Global Drug Policy program, Open Society Foundations (OSF): [www.opensocietyfoundations.org/about/programs/global-drug-policy-program](http://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/about/programs/global-drug-policy-program)

<sup>3</sup> Harm Reduction International (2012) Global State of Harm Reduction 2012: <http://www.ihra.net/global-state-of-harm-reduction>

<sup>4</sup> Reid SR (2009) Harm Reduction Journal 6:24: [www.harmreductionjournal.com/content/6/1/24](http://www.harmreductionjournal.com/content/6/1/24)

- People who are afraid of the police are reluctant to seek health and HIV prevention services.
- In many countries, people who use drugs are likely to be in prison or pre-trial detention at some time in their lives, sometimes more than once. In Africa, these are very high-risk environments for HIV and offer little prevention such as harm reduction or condoms.
- When police performance is judged by the number of arrests, drug users are easy targets. Police may even target health facilities to capture people who use drugs, making these services even less attractive to those who need them.
- Drug paraphernalia laws in some countries make it a crime to carry a sterile syringe, or trace amounts of a drug in a used syringe may be considered evidence of criminal possession. Legal provisions such as these force people to share syringes or hide and reuse syringes.
- Police ‘crackdowns’ have encouraged people to switch from smoking or inhaling drugs to injecting them, because they feel pressured to consume rapidly.
- Demonising people who use drugs just reinforces patterns of stigma, social marginalisation, poverty, abandonment by families and communities, and disempowerment – all things that undermine a person’s ability to protect themselves from HIV and to seek HIV services.
- Fuelled by the perception of people who use drugs as criminals and sinners, scientifically-proven harm reduction services – such as needle and syringe programs – remain unavailable in most African countries. While vast sums of money are invested in policing and the criminal justice system, very little has been made available for the health and social support needed by people who use drugs.<sup>5</sup>

## THE 2016 UNGASS

Many countries around the world have realised that enough is enough, and are developing more humane and evidence-based drug policies. The UNGASS on drugs was due to be held in 2019 – but was brought forward by the Presidents of Colombia, Guatemala and Mexico given the urgency of this issue. Policy reform in this area is essential for building supportive environments for people who use drugs.

The preparations have already begun at the UN Commission on Narcotic Drugs (CND) in Vienna, Austria – with a high-level review of international drug policies scheduled for March 2014 (countries are currently negotiating a ‘Joint Ministerial Statement’ on the progress made so far and the remaining challenges). We urge NGOs working on HIV/AIDS in Africa to engage in this process – which is every bit as crucial to their work as the UNGASS on HIV. This engagement can include:

- Find out who is in your country’s CND and UNGASS delegations, and try to interact with them to work out their positions on this issue.
- Following the debates, and holding your government accountable for their contributions – see [www.cndblog.org](http://www.cndblog.org) for detailed reports from Vienna.
- Offer ideas, suggestions and support to encourage your ‘friendly’ government contacts to become engaged in this discussion and to use this opportunity to promote better drug policies.
- Join the International Drug Policy Consortium (IDPC) as an NGO member, and/or subscribe to our regular alerts and updates: [www.idpc.net](http://www.idpc.net)
- Become a member of the Vienna NGO Committee on Drugs (VNGOC), who are mandated to ensure NGO involvement in this process: [www.vngoc.org](http://www.vngoc.org)

**For more information, please contact Jamie Bridge: [jbridge@idpc.net](mailto:jbridge@idpc.net)**

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<sup>5</sup> Global Commission on Drug Policy (2012) The War on Drugs and HIV/AIDS: [www.globalcommissionondrugs.org/hivaids-pandemic](http://www.globalcommissionondrugs.org/hivaids-pandemic)