

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, 336 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. CCDAC
66. CEHURD
67. Center for Humane Policy
68. Center for Prisoner Health and Human Rights
69. Centre Associatif Polyvalent d'Aide Hépatite C
70. Centre des R.O.S.É.S. de l'Abitibi-Témiscamingue
71. Centre for Law Enforcement and Public Health
72. Centre for Research and Information on Substance Abuse
73. Centre for Research and Information on Substance Abuse
74. Centre Marocain Pour la sécurité et la Démocratie
75. Centre on Drug Policy Evaluation
76. Centre sida Amitié in Québec
77. Centro de Investigación Drogas y Derechos Humanos
78. Centro de Orientación e Investigación Integral
79. Children Education Society
80. Children's Education Foundation
81. Chunikhel society Nepal
82. CIRC
83. Citywide Drugs Crisis Campaign
84. Coalition des organismes communautaires québécois de lutte contre le sida
85. Coalition Marocaine de Droits à la Santé
86. Coalition Marocaine pour la Justice Climatique
87. Coalition PLUS
88. Coalition Sida des Sourds du Québec
89. Collectif Police Contre la Prohibition
90. Collectif Urgence Toxida
91. Comité Binacional de VIH y sida e ITS
92. Community Alliance Georgia
93. Conectas Human Rights
94. Corporación Humanas Colombia
95. Corporación Kimirina
96. Cultura Joven A.C.
97. Death Penalty Focus
98. Dee-Dee Stout Consulting

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

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

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| 314. Transnational Institute - Drugs & Democracy programme | 324. We Help Ourselves |
| 315. Treatment Action Group | 325. West Africa Drug Policy Network-Ghana |
| 316. Trystereo/New Orleans Harm Reduction Network | 326. Western Harm Reduction Network |
| 317. Uganda Harm Reduction Network | 327. White Noise Movement |
| 318. Unharming Ohio | 328. Women for Health |
| 319. UNITE Global Network of Parliamentarians to End HIV/AIDS, viral hepatitis and other infectious diseases | 329. Women's Coalition Against Cancer |
| 320. Urban Survivors Union | 330. World Hepatitis Alliance |
| 321. Veterans for Medical Cannabis Access | 331. Yamaka Youth Network |
| 322. Virginia Harm Reduction Coalition | 332. Young Wave |
| 323. Washington Office on Latin America | 333. Youth Organisations for Drug Action |
| | 334. Youth RISE |
| | 335. Zimbabwe Civil liberties and Drug Network |
| | 336. 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