

Call to Action: Support Global Drug Policy Reform

World Drug Day, 26 June 2009

I. The War on Drugs has become a War on People

As the United Nations brings worldwide attention to problems related to illicit drugs, we call for a new approach.

In too many countries, the “war on drugs” has become a war on people. Millions of non-violent drug users face abuse and imprisonment, while they have no access to proper healthcare or effective treatment. Low-level traders and producers receive sentences disproportionate to their crimes and languish in prisons around the globe. Millions more face crop destruction and police harassment as they struggle to make ends meet, with few alternatives as the global economy falters. Meanwhile, the HIV epidemic gains pace.

II. Five Actions Today

After decades of policies that have failed to make our societies safer or healthier, and given overwhelming evidence which shows that criminalizing drugs is both counterproductive and highly destructive, we call on governments to:

1. Focus on reducing the harms related to drug trade and use, such as making needle and syringe exchange programs widely available.
2. Decriminalize the possession of drugs for personal use.
3. Ensure that evidence-based treatments for pain and addiction are widely available, including methadone and buprenorphine.
4. Treat supporting farmers in moving away from coca or poppy cultivation as a development issue.
5. Comply fully with human rights obligations in any drug control measure, ensuring proportionality of penalties, abolishing the death penalty, and avoiding non-evidence-based forms of treatment.

III. Driving Away Drug Users Creates Public Health Disasters

Nearly three decades into the global HIV epidemic, we reiterate that driving people who use drugs underground only makes the transmission of HIV and hepatitis more likely. The number of HIV infections due to injecting drug use is rising steadily. In parts of Eastern Europe and South-East Asia, this figure reaches 80%.

As the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies has said, *“Forcing drug users to hide and denying them access to life-saving treatment and prevention services is creating a public health disaster. This happens even though the evidence from scientific and medical research on best practices and cost benefit analyses is overwhelmingly in favour of harm reduction programming.... The message is clear. It is time to be guided by light of science, not by the darkness of ignorance and fear.”*

Indeed, rather than a security-focused approach that costs roughly \$100 billion per year worldwide, we need to look at this first and foremost through the lens of public health. In the blind effort to rid the world of drugs, 80% of cancer patients worldwide are denied access to opiate-based pain relief.

IV. Adopt a Humane Approach

A humane, compassionate approach to drug use based on harm reduction principles and respect for human rights is the most effective way to limit the negative impact of drug use, trade, and production. Scientific and medical research on best practices and cost benefit analyses overwhelmingly favors harm reduction programs, including needle exchange, drug substitution therapy, and condom distribution.

We applaud countries who have already taken steps in this direction. Recently, both Germany and Switzerland have voted to make medical heroin available for chronically dependent opiate users and the new U.S. administration has come out in support of needle exchange. Ecuador pardoned thousands of drug ‘mules’ imprisoned with disproportionate sentences and 80 Argentinean judges made a public call to reform their country’s drug laws.

In order to stop the spiral of drug-related violence and disease intensifying across the globe, more countries must follow suit.

This Call to Action is supported by:

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