

## Global drug strategies should be comprehensive, balanced and prevention-oriented

Global drug problems affect multiple sectors of society, including (but not limited to) health care, education, employment and productivity, law enforcement and crime, and child development. No one approach to those problems is sufficient to address this wide range of impact, and the harm reduction paradigm cannot replace a comprehensive drug strategy in global, national and local drug policies. Harm reduction approaches include policies, programs and practices that aim to diminish the negative consequences associated with the use of psychoactive drugs among people unable or unwilling to stop.

FORUT strongly suggests that the development of global drug strategy incorporate the following key principles and guidance:

### **UN conventions point to a broad, balanced and humane drug policy**

United Nations drug conventions provide substantial guidance and latitude for countries seeking to design broad, balanced and humane drug policies that are consistent with the principles of human rights.

Successful strategies to reduce drug-related harm utilize a balance of measures from several key intervention areas, including demand reduction, supply reduction, early intervention, treatment, rehabilitation, social re-integration, and assistance with acute health problems for active drug users.

### **Prevention is by far the most effective strategy for harm reduction**

Broad population-oriented interventions, including demand and supply reduction measures that target and seek to reduce the prevalence of drug use and its social acceptance are key to harm reduction, because they work to minimize the first occurrence of drug-related harm. Early interventions can prevent enormous human suffering - among drug users and the many people around them.

Prevention is cost-effective; it is a sustainable and people-empowering; and it is the most humane policy option, particularly in the context of assuring the best interests of the world's children. Effective prevention methods are well-established around the globe and their economic and social value has been repeatedly proven.

### **Providing services to addicts and problem users is a necessary, but insufficient means to address the overall harm from drugs**

The concept of harm reduction is neither new nor particularly innovative among policies and strategies to combat alcohol and drug problems. The delivery of health and social services to addicts and problem users has long been an element of national policies in countries that have taken substance use problems seriously. What is new, however, is the current suggestion that harm reduction policies represent an adequate alternative to other strategies designed to prevent or address drug-related harms at much earlier stages in their evolution. Such an approach will inevitably lead to higher levels of drug-related harm.

### **Harm reduction can never replace primary prevention and treatment/rehabilitation as the main strategy in global, national and local drug policies.**

Harm reduction initiatives, which often enable the use of drugs to reduce related harms (such as crime, injection-rooms, needle exchange etc.) will never be able to address the bulk of drug-related harm. Nonetheless, health and social services that assist drug users with their acute problems are vital for those affected, who have the same right to such services as others in society. Assistance with acute problems provides essential support for those who seek to conquer their addiction to drugs. Such harm-reduction services integrate users into the health care system and help treat and contain co-morbid conditions, such as the spread of communicable diseases caused by contaminated needles and syringes.

**The adoption of harm reduction strategies should not diminish current commitments to or investments in the development of prevention-oriented drug policies and the provision of treatment for drug problems.**

The development of a broad, balanced, and humane substance use policy represents an ambitious undertaking because it must address the needs of numerous, relevant target populations and cover the wide spectrum of alcohol- and drug-related harm.

Experience from alcohol-policy development provides important lessons for the drug field regarding the efficacy and propriety of harm reduction approaches to drug problems. Over the years, alcohol-industry vested interests have promoted harm reduction approaches as the main strategy to prevent alcohol-related problems. Industry's purpose was clear: to avoid the imposition of proven, effective, population-based preventive interventions that reduce overall alcohol consumption and problems, but also take a bite out of total alcohol sales.

A narrow focus on a harm reduction approach that targets primarily problem users also has self-limiting effects because it misses the opportunity to influence the habits and culture of the broader majority population, which is also at risk. The general population is not only at risk, but also can play an essential role in challenging addiction denial among friends and family members and in supporting their abstinence and recovery. Many drug users need strong and sustained support from their nearest relatives and friends, from their local community, from the treatment sector, and from the society at large in order to free themselves from the addiction.

**Investing in prevention is cost-effective**

Population-based prevention strategies that aim to minimize or eliminate drug use and consequent problems have proven to be cost-effective approaches to improve societal health. The success of those primary prevention interventions stems from their focus on mobilizing individuals and local communities to create and support drug-free environments. Relatively small financial investments can generate wide-spread popular activities that complement broader prevention and treatment strategies. Deterring drug use – particularly among young people – can save some of the substantial sums needed to repair the severe health and social problems suffered by many heavy drug users.

Certainly, funds must continue to be made available for treatment and rehabilitation, which receive lamentably inadequate resources in most societies today. The reality is that neglecting a strong commitment to and significant investment of resources and political will in primary prevention will strain the health and safety budgets of even the wealthiest nations on earth and lead to higher levels of dangerous, untreated addiction problems.

*FORUT is a Norwegian development NGO, specialized in the field of Alcohol, Drugs and Development, that actively engages with civil society partners and governments in selected countries in Asia and Africa.*

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