

Thematic debate in plenary
Statement on harm reduction
Delivered by Pascal Tanguay, Asian Harm Reduction Network

Mr. Chairman, distinguished delegates, colleagues and friends.

Reducing negative health consequences of drug use

My colleagues and I welcome Mr. Costa's recognition that the drug control regime is rooted in the premise of concern for health, and UNODC's recent report on the importance of reducing the adverse health and social consequences of drug use. Recognizing that drug dependence is a chronic, relapsing health condition, the maxim "do no harm" must be applied to drug control policy. To this end, we support the statement by the European Union in yesterday's plenary calling on UNODC to improve its collaboration with UNAIDS, UNDP, and WHO. We stress that such coherence must highlight the need to integrate drug control and health policies while respecting the primacy of health concerns.

Definition of harm reduction

We wish to take issue, however, with the overly broad notion that everything UNODC does or that is done in the name of drug control amounts to harm reduction. Such an approach risks inflicting harm — by rhetorical sleight of hand, state policies and actions that impede efforts to protect health and that lead to foreseeable human rights abuses get recast as "harm reduction". Campaigns that demonize and dehumanize people who use drugs, creating a climate in which discrimination, violence and other human rights abuses result, are not "harm reduction". Police crackdowns outside health services for people who use drugs are not "harm reduction". Mass incarceration or even capital punishment for possession and use of minor quantities of drugs are not "harm reduction". Compulsory drug dependence treatment, and abusive practices in the name of such treatment, are not "harm reduction".

Harm reduction is NOT an alternative to approaches that seek to reduce drug use but rather seeks to complement these approaches. In comparison, harm reduction is couched in a public health paradigm rather than public security. Harm reduction can work alongside approaches that aim for reductions in drug use. However, a harm reduction approach recognises that many people throughout the world use psychoactive substances, and that society is unlikely to ever be drug-free. [Harm reduction](#) is about reducing the negative consequences of drug use for drug users and the wider community. It is about reducing the adverse consequences of drug use without necessarily reducing consumption although this is often a side effect. Harm reduction is also about preventing HIV transmission as well as other blood-borne infections like hepatitis C. Harm reduction is about saving lives.

The term harm reduction refers to various strategies and approaches for reducing the physical and social harms associated with risk behaviour. One example is the recognition

that abstinence from sex or sticking to one sexual partner may not be attainable for all persons therefore requiring the promotion of hundred percent condom use. Harm reduction among injecting drug users (IDUs) can take many forms, including counseling, drug substitution, needle exchange, supervised injection facilities. Harm reduction can be applied to use of legal drugs and other areas where complete abstinence from risk behaviour is unlikely to be achieved in a short timespan. Harm reduction is about making risky behaviours and situations less dangerous.

Harm reduction does not exclude abstinence as a goal for individuals who are dependent but, rather, recognizing that drug dependence is a chronic, relapsing health condition, does not necessarily require cessation of drug use, and instead equips people with more pragmatic choices such as limiting their intake and with the means to protect themselves, their families and their communities against harm.

Harm reduction approaches also seek to identify and advocate for changes in laws, regulations and policies that increase harms, or which hinder the introduction of harm reduction interventions. Evidence clearly demonstrates that harm reduction reduces the impact of substance use for the individual and society, and helps keep people alive and well. Harm reduction saves lives.

What does harm reduction include?

Effective harm reduction requires a comprehensive package of health and social care services, including opioid substitution treatment, provision of sterile injecting equipment, peer education, outreach, safe spaces for people who use drugs, voluntary HIV counselling and testing, drug dependence treatment that complies with human rights standards, access to antiretroviral treatment, primary healthcare, psychosocial services, as well as services that increase the sustainability of such interventions such as economic rehabilitation including vocational training and micro-credit; advocacy; as well as capacity building for all stakeholder groups. In many places where such provisions have become mainstream for some time. For example, in the EU and elsewhere, evidence based interventions such as safe injecting sites and heroin prescription for clients have also been incorporated.

It is important to also recognize that the meaningful involvement of people who use drugs in the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of drug-related services increases their relevance and effectiveness among that target group.

The way forward

Any evaluation of progress in the response to drugs must include an assessment of progress in reducing harms associated with problematic drug use. The current global review and reflection process does not include provisions to address this dimension independently — and watering down the concept of “harm reduction”, unnecessarily compounds this situation. As part of this review, there must be some concerted evaluation of access to, and quality of harm reduction services. The CND and UNODC are

encouraged to commit to establishing a working group of member states, UN agencies including WHO, UNAIDS, UNODC, and OHCHR, and civil society, including groups of people who use drugs to review progress in this area.