

COLLECTIVE CIVIL SOCIETY STATEMENT

The international community must act on UN human rights chief's ground-breaking call for systemic drug policy reform — 134 organisations from 48 countries

Wednesday, 20 September 2023 (Geneva, Switzerland) — In a historical [report](#) launched today, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights denounced the failure of punitive drug policies and the global ‘war on drugs’, and called for a new approach based on health and human rights, including through the legal regulation of drugs. To implement the recommendations laid down by the High Commissioner, we call on the international community to reform and rebalance the global drug control regime, and national drug laws and policies.

For decades, the unrealistic goal of achieving a ‘drug-free society’ has driven the international community to approach drugs with prohibition, criminalisation and harsh punishment. Following the UN General Assembly Special Session on Drugs (UNGASS) in 2016, there has been growing emphasis at the UN on the health, human rights, and development dimensions of drugs and drug policy. But efforts to materialise these commitments have been insufficient. The High Commissioner for Human Rights has now taken a bold step forward with the unequivocal recognition that punitive drug policies drive widespread human rights violations and fuel discrimination.

With this report, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights is the first UN agency to call for the responsible regulation of drugs as a pragmatic measure to protect public health and the human rights of all. This comes at a time when over 250 million people already live in jurisdictions where legal cannabis markets are a reality, and countries such as Colombia and Germany are announcing similar plans. In addition, Bolivia has just triggered the process to review the international scheduling and control of the coca leaf, as it was subject to international control in 1961 on the basis of outdated and racist prejudices.

The new report also systematises the growing body of recommendations on drug policy provided by UN human rights experts. As such, it serves as a blueprint to design responses based on the respect of public health and human rights. Some of the most important findings include:

- Recognising harm reduction as a central element of the right to health
- Identifying the militarisation of drug control as a driver of state violence
- Calling for the abolition of the death penalty for drug offences
- Recognising the contribution of disproportionate drug laws to global mass incarceration
- Documenting the use of drug policies to target marginalised groups such as Indigenous Peoples, people of African descent, and women.
- Recognising the disproportionate negative effects of prohibition and criminalisation on populations caught in humanitarian crises.

Transforming the global punitive approach to drugs requires changes in the foundational norms and institutions of the international drug control regime, which have been historically centred on prohibition and criminalisation. This includes the reform of the UN drug control conventions and the rebalancing of UN drug control bodies, such as the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and the International Narcotics Control Board (INCB), which remain reticent to engage with countries to promote the alternative drug policies at the centre of the High Commissioner’s proposal, including the decriminalisation of drug use and related activities and the need to increase equitable access to harm reduction services, both of which are also central to the [UN System Common Position on drugs](#).

Considering the historical importance of the High Commissioner's report, we collectively provide the following recommendations:

- We urge Member States to use the upcoming [mid-term review](#) of the 2019 Ministerial Declaration on drugs to rebalance the global approach to drugs by enshrining the protection of human rights, public health, and the principles of equality and non-discrimination as essential objectives of the global drug control system, and by adding an item on the protection of human rights in the agenda of the UN Commission on Narcotic Drugs.
- We call on the international community to meaningfully involve civil society organisations and populations directly affected by the 'war on drugs', including key populations such as people who use drugs, and people involved in illicit economies, in every stage of drug policy decision-making, implementation, monitoring and evaluation.
- We urge Member States to initiate a review of the UN drug conventions to allow for a human rights-based approach to legal regulation and repeal the provisions that mandate the abolition of traditional uses of internationally controlled plants and substances.
- We call on the Human Rights Council to create a mechanism for periodic reporting and development of recommendations on the alignment of human rights with drug policy. This should be through either a periodic mandate for the High Commissioner for Human Rights to report on the human rights impacts of drug policy or the creation of an investigative body or special mandate on drug policy.
- We welcome the growing body of recommendations by UN human rights mechanisms with regards to the human rights implications of drug policies. We encourage all human rights mechanisms to follow the path opened by the High Commissioner by focusing on how punitive drug policies, including the global drug control regime, can become obstacles in themselves for the full enjoyment of human rights.
- We call on drug control bodies, including the UNODC and the INCB, to integrate the human rights dimension of drug policy in their workplans in a systematic way, to ensure this is reflected in their yearly reports, and to mainstream the findings and standards laid down by the High Commissioner in their cooperation with Member States.
- We call on the UNODC, Member States, and national drug control bodies to refrain from supporting and funding punitive responses to drugs, and ensure that any financial and technical assistance provided to third countries for drug law enforcement operations does not contribute, or carries a real risk of contributing, to the commission of human rights violations.
- We call on UN agencies and the international community actors in health and protection services to integrate harm reduction services within the humanitarian response framework.
- We urge UN agencies with relevant mandates to follow the example of the High Commissioner for Human Rights by ending the taboo on the responsible regulation of drugs, and to provide evidence, recommendations, and international standards on legally regulated markets aligned with the UN values of promoting health, human rights, and development.

List of signatory organisations:

1. Aboriginal Drug & Alcohol Council, Australia
2. Addiction Medicine Association of Malaysia (AMAM), Malaysia
3. Alliance Nationale Des Communautés Pour La Santé (ANCS), Senegal
4. Amnesty International, Global
5. Andrey Rylkov Foundation for Health and Social Justice, Russia
6. Anti-Death Penalty Asia Network (ADPAN), Malaysia
7. APCOM Foundation, Asia and the Pacific
8. Asia Pacific Network of People living with HIV (APN+), Thailand
9. Asociación Costarricense para el Estudio e Intervención en Drogas (ACEID), Costa Rica
10. Associação Brasileira de Estudos Multidisciplinares sobre Drogas (ABRAMD), Brazil
11. Associação Brasileira de Lésbicas, Gays, Bissexuais, Travestis, Transexuais e Intersex (ABGLT), Brazil
12. Associação Brasileira de Saúde Mental (ABRASME), Brazil
13. Associação Elas Existem - Mulheres Encarceradas , Brazil
14. Black Initiative for a New Drug Policy, Brazil
15. Brazilian Network of Harm Reduction and Human Rights (REDUC), Brazil
16. Brazilian Drug Policy Platform, Brazil
17. Brussels Federation of Institutions for Drug and Addictions (féda bxl), Belgium
18. Canadian Drug Policy Coalition, Canada
19. Centro de Investigación Drogas y Derechos Humanos (CIDDDH), Peru
20. Centre for Research and Information on Substance Abuse (CRISA), Nigeria
21. Centre of Excellence for Research in AIDS (CERIA), Malaysia
22. Centre on Drug Policy Evaluation (CDPE), Canada
23. Centro de Estudios Legales y Sociales (CELS), Argentina
24. Centro de Pensamiento desde la Amazonia Colombiana AlaOrillaDelRío, Colombia
25. Centro de Referência sobre Drogas e Vulnerabilidades Associadas da UnB, Brazil
26. Children's Legal Rights and Development Center (CLRDC), Philippines
27. Citywide Drugs Crisis Campaign, Ireland
28. Coletiva Todas Unidas, Brazil
29. Comité Permanente por la Defensa de los Derechos Humanos, Ecuador
30. Consumidores Associados Sobrevivem Organizados (CASO), Portugal
31. Corporación Acción Técnica Social, Colombia
32. Corporación Feminista Brujas, Colombia
33. Corporación Humanas Centro Regional de Derechos Humanos y Justicia de Género, Colombia
34. Corporación Mujeres Libres, Colombia
35. Correlation - European Harm Reduction Network (C-EHRN), Netherlands
36. CREA, India/USA
37. Dejusticia, Colombia
38. Deliberar, Colombia
39. Drug Harm Reduction Advocacy Network Nigeria (DHRAN), Nigeria
40. Drug Policy Alliance, USA
41. Drug Policy Australia, Australia
42. Drug Policy Network South East Europe (DPNSEE), Serbia
43. Društvo AREAL, Slovenia
44. Elementa DDHH, Colombia/México
45. Empower India, India
46. Equal Health and Rights Access Advocacy Initiative (EHRAAI), Nigeria
47. EQUIS Justicia para las Mujeres, México
48. Estonian Association of People Using Psychoactive Substances "LUNEST", Estonia
49. Eurasian Harm Reduction Association (EHRA), Lithuania
50. Familias y Retos Extraordinarios AC, México

51. Federal Council of Psychology, (Conselho Federal de Psicologia), Brazil
52. Fédération Addiction, France
53. Forum Droghe, Italy
54. Foundation Mainline, Netherlands
55. Free Legal Assistance Group (FLAG), Philippines
56. Fundación Dignidad, Ecuador
57. Fundación Latinoamérica Reforma, Chile
58. Gayon Albay LGBT Org., Inc., Philippines
59. Grupo de Ativistas em Tratamentos (GAT), Portugal
60. Harm Reduction Australia (HRA), Australia
61. Harm Reduction International, United Kingdom
62. Health Poverty Action, Global
63. Heart That Cares For Better Health Organization, Nigeria
64. Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights, Poland
65. Hepatitis Australia, Australia
66. HIV Legal Network/Réseau juridique VIH, Canada
67. House Of Rainbow CIC, United Kingdom
68. Humaania päihdepolitiikkaa ry, Finland
69. IDUCARE, Philippines
70. India HIV/AIDS Alliance, India
71. Indian Drug Users' Forum, India
72. Institute of Politics and Governance (IPG), Inc., Philippines
73. Instituto RIA, AC, Mexico
74. Instituto Terra, Trabalho e Cidadania (ITTC), Brazil
75. Intercambios Civil Association, Argentina
76. International AIDS Society, Switzerland
77. International Center for Ethnobotanical Education, Research and Service (ICEERS), Spain
78. International Commission of Jurists, Switzerland
79. International Drug Law Advocacy and Resource Center, USA
80. International Drug Policy Consortium (IDPC), Global
81. International Network of People who Use Drugs (INPUD), Global
82. International Women's Rights Action Watch Asia Pacific (IWRAW), Malaysia
83. Kaleidos – Universidad de Cuenca, Ecuador
84. La Società della Ragione Onlus, Italy
85. Law Enforcement Action Partnership, USA
86. Lembaga Bantuan Hukum Masyarakat (LBHM), Indonesia
87. Malaysian AIDS Council, Malaysia
88. Manipur Users Collective, India
89. Mexico Unido Contra la Delincuencia A.C., Mexico
90. Middle East and North Africa Network of People Who Use Drugs (MENANPUD)
91. Mujeres Unidas por la Libertad México, A.C, Mexico
92. National Network Of Anti-Prohibitionist Feminists, Brazil
93. Network of Asian People who Use Drugs (NAPUD), Thailand
94. NGO Cannabis Institute Pelagonija, Prilep, North Macedonia
95. Nigeria Network of People who use drugs (NNPUD), Nigeria
96. NoBox Transitions Foundation Inc. (NoBox Philippines), Philippines
97. NZ Drug Foundation, New Zealand
98. Observatorio De Derechos Humanos Para Grupos Vulnerabilizados (ODHGV), Republica Dominicana
99. Open Society Foundations, Global
100. Organisation for the Prevention of Intense Suffering (OPIS), Switzerland
101. Ozone Foundation, Thailand
102. Paroles Autour de la Santé et de Environment, Ivory Coast
103. Penal Reform International (PRI), Global
104. Pengasih Malaysia, Malaysia
105. Penington Institute, Australia
106. Philippine Alliance of Human Rights Advocates (PAHRA), Philippines
107. POS Foundation, Ghana
108. PREKURSOR Foundation for Social Policy, Poland

- 109.Recovering Nepal, National Federation of PUD and Drug Service Organization, Nepal
- 110.Red Internacional de Mujeres Familiares de personas privadas de la Libertad (RIMUF), Global
- 111.Red Latinoamericana de Mujeres Libertarias Fundiendo Rejas, Latin America
- 112.Redes da Maré, Brazil
- 113.Release, United Kingdom
- 114.Released Malta, Malta
- 115.RESET - Drug Policy and Human Rights, Argentina
- 116.Responsabilité Espoir Vie Solidarité (REVS PLUS), Burkina Faso
- 117.Rights Reporter Foundation (RRF), Hungary
- 118.SANANIM, Czech Republic
- 119.Sexual Rights Initiative, Switzerland
- 120.Sikkim Drug Users Forum (SDUF), India
- 121.Skoun Lebanese Addictions Center, Lebanon
- 122.Steps Non Profit, Greece
- 123.Stop Overdose Now Foundation, Netherlands
- 124.StoptheDrugWar.org, USA
- 125.StreetLawPh, Philippines
- 126.TB HIV Care NPC, South Africa
- 127.Transform Drug Policy Foundation, United Kingdom
- 128.Transformative Justice Collective, Singapore
- 129.Transnational Institute, Netherlands
- 130.Uniting NSW, Australia
- 131.Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA), USA
- 132.Women and Harm Reduction International Network (WHRIN), Indonesia
- 133.World Coalition Against the Death Penalty, Global
- 134.Youth RISE, Global