

2nd Conference on Harm Reduction in Mauritius: Towards a Client-Centered Approach
September 20 -22, 2011

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In October 2009, the first Conference on Opiate Abuse and Harm Reduction Services in Mauritius brought together over 150 participants including civil society, government and the private sector. Local, regional and international actors working in the field of harm reduction contributed to a successful conference that took stock of the risks and harms associated with injecting drug use in Mauritius and the harm reduction responses being implemented. The second conference, to be held on September 20th to 22nd, 2011 is a follow up to the first and its principal objective is to **provide a platform for sharing strategies and perspectives for a more effective integrated response to harm reduction based on humanist principles of human rights and public health for all.**

Harm Reduction is a relatively new social policy that emerged in response to the spread of HIV among injecting drug users in the 1980s. It acknowledges that despite the strongest efforts to prevent initiation to and continuation of drug use, many people throughout the world continue to use psychoactive drugs and that it is therefore crucial to reduce the risks associated with drug use. Harm reduction challenges policies and practices that intentionally or unintentionally create or exacerbate risks and harms for drug users. These include “the criminalisation of drug use, discrimination, abusive and corrupt policing practices, restrictive and punitive laws and policies, the denial of life-saving medical care and harm reduction services, and social inequities.”¹

Mauritius is the first country in Sub-Saharan Africa to have implemented harm reduction measures in order to curb both the IDU and HIV epidemic. Since 2006 local NGOS, notably the Collectif Urgence Toxida, as well as the Ministry of Health and Quality of Life have been implementing harm reduction services on the island. Both Methadone Substitution Therapy and Needle Exchange Programmes are available for injecting drug users. There has been a significant scaling up of these services, but as several reports reveal, there continues to be fundamental gaps in the implementation of a holistic harm reduction response:

- There is a lack of understanding of the concepts of Harm Reduction among stakeholders contributing to the stigmatization and exclusion of persons who use drugs.²
- There is a low level of psycho-social support for Methadone Substitution Therapy (MST) users.³
- There are still discrepancies in the level of service within the Needle Exchange Programs being operated by different stakeholders.
- Lack of sensitivity to harm reduction approaches amongst law enforcement personnel interferes with the delivery of services to beneficiaries.
- Contradictory legal frameworks hamper the effectiveness of harm reduction services
- There are international best practices that could be adapted to the local context to offer better treatment and services to people who use drugs. These range from health products and services, to policies.

The 2011 Harm Reduction Conference, whose theme is **‘A Client Centered Approach’** will engage participants in a discussion *on the ways of improving the quality of harm reduction services delivered in Mauritius so as to better cater to the needs of beneficiaries.* Importantly, the conference will emphasize the human rights and public health principles that underscore the Harm Reduction Approach. Proposed themes to be addressed during the conference include:

- Forming multi-sector partnerships for an integrated and holistic National Strategic Framework
- Addressing the stigmatisation of and discrimination against people who use drugs.
- Implementing Harm Reduction services in prisons
- Engaging law enforcement personnel in harm reduction
- Community based harm reduction strategies
- Drug policy reform to accommodate a harm reduction approach
- Addressing the precarious conditions of injecting drug users and their families
- Training healthcare personnel in terms of care and treatment of injecting drug users.

A conference report and advocacy document will be prepared after the conference to be used in CUT’s advocacy work aimed at sensitizing decision makers to the concepts and benefits of Harm Reduction approaches.

¹ ‘Harm Reduction International Statement on What is Harm Reduction.’ <http://www.ihra.net/what-is-harm-reduction>

² Moore, S., Ramanjooloo, V., 2010. Assessment Report on Strengthening Capacity to Provide Psycho-Social Support to People Living With HIV AIDS and Injecting Drug Users on Methadone Maintenance Therapy, APMG

³ *ibid*