

## RESEARCH BRIEF:

### **The Impact of Harm Reduction Programs on Law Enforcement in Southeast Asia: What Works and What Doesn't**

**Research Question:** What impact do harm reduction programs have on law enforcement policy and practice to reduce HIV related risk among injecting drug users and their communities in Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam?

**Background and rationale:** The HIV/AIDS epidemic in Southeast Asia is associated with accelerating economic and social burdens. These threaten regional stability, livelihoods and development. Injecting of illicit drugs in this region is a primary driver of increasing HIV prevalence. The illegality of the activity implies that the delivery of effective approaches to minimise HIV risk among and from IDUs occurs within the context of law enforcement (LE) policy and practice.

LE policy and practice is evolving towards greater endorsement of harm reduction (HR) approaches in Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam; however, bringing HR activities to scale has not yet been achieved. The impact of LE policy and practice on street-level HIV risk, and on HR activities, has been researched and documented in depth.<sup>1</sup> However, far less is known about what influences LE in the region. Are programs and approaches, including advocacy, that are aimed at fostering an environment supportive of HR for all IDUs, effective at influencing LE policy and practice? This research aims to fill this crucial knowledge gap by elucidating fundamental enablers and barriers to positive change within the culture of LE agencies from national to grass-roots level.

#### **Objectives:**

1. To identify key drivers of the endorsement and incorporation of HR principles in LE policy and practice, in a variety of socio-political contexts, in three countries of Southeast Asia:
  - to build a stronger evidence base to guide effective HR policy and programs;
  - to help create supportive environments for street-level HR activities for women and men who are IDUs; and
  - to provide practical, field-derived and tested recommendations for implementation of HR practice in SE Asia.
2. To strengthen capacity regionally:
  - of relevant researchers and institutes in Asia; and
  - of existing agencies, forums and networks involved with LE relating to HIV/IDUs.

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<sup>1</sup> Kerr T, Small W & Wood E. The public health and social impacts of drug market enforcement: A review of the evidence. *Int J Drug Policy*, 16:2005; 210-220.



## Findings:

This research has produced a much improved understanding of the nature of policing in regards to drug issues in these three countries, and of the competing pressures on police. In all three countries, police are subject to strong imperatives – from government, from their superiors, from the communities in which they work, and sometimes from international agencies – to react strongly against drug supply and use. But to varying degrees across the three countries and over time, police are also increasingly being called upon to be part of the HIV prevention team, a role often seen to be in conflict with their drug control role. This produces often great tension for individual police and within police forces

The research has shown that where harm reduction has been introduced in concert with locally identified priorities, it has been accepted and supported by police; where this has not happened, it has got a much colder reception. Major lessons from the research for the introduction, support and development of harm reduction policy and programs in these countries include the need to bring police on side in accordance with their own perceived needs; and in general the need to tailor responses to local circumstance.

## Recommendations:

1. The involvement of law enforcement is critical to the success of harm reduction programs at all levels – regional, national and local.
2. There is a pressing need for law enforcement agencies and authorities to share ownership of harm reduction.
3. Police must be engaged early by harm reduction programs; not as a subsidiary but as a core partner.
4. There is a need to document the experiences of law enforcement and harm reduction working together in the region, at all levels, both positive and negative.
5. Involvement of law enforcement at local level must be through effective community partnerships based on mutual understanding and respect, and should include local communities, local police authorities and other relevant partners.
6. There need to be multi-sectoral structures among all key agencies involved at all levels, so that working relationships can be established and maintained.
7. To ensure police and others in the law enforcement sector are enabled to fulfil a harm reduction mission and have the capacity to be effective partners, they need adequate resourcing.
8. Harm reduction activities must be integrated into police planning, and show congruency with other government department plans.
9. Political awareness and support are fundamental to the success of law enforcement and harm reduction partnerships and programs, and must be matched by government leadership and investment in harm reduction.
10. Solutions must be practical and be seen to be of worth by police – police responses and responsibilities in the partnership must be operationalised.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Sleeping with the enemy: Engaging with law enforcement in prevention of HIV among and from injecting drug users in Asia. HIV Matters Volume 2, Number 16, 1 August 2010

