



Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS
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Information note

WARSAW POLICY DIALOGUE: HIV/AIDS AND INJECTING DRUG USE AN UNPRECEDENTED CRISIS

Geneva, 14 November 2003 - HIV/AIDS among injecting drug users constitutes an unprecedented crisis. In at least several countries HIV/AIDS epidemics beginning among injecting drug users have sparked major epidemics in the general population.

Alarm and grave concern were expressed at the second International Policy Dialogue on HIV/AIDS held in Warsaw, 12 -14 November. Policymakers from ten countries as well as representatives from United Nations agencies and international and national non-governmental organizations considered a declaration calling for a pragmatic focus on the immediate risks and harms of HIV transmitted through injecting drug use.

The delegates of the meeting emphasized that drug control laws and their interpretation should not hinder HIV/AIDS prevention among injecting drug users or increase the risk of HIV infection faced by drug users. Dr Kathleen Cravero, Deputy Executive Director of UNAIDS, said: "In a world with AIDS, we cannot afford to drive people who use drugs into hiding through stigma, neglect and persecution. Instead, we must put in place measures that reduce the harm caused by drug use, thereby reducing vulnerability to HIV. And we must make special efforts to reach young people before they turn to drugs as an escape from despair or as an alternative to productive, healthy lifestyles."

The meeting assessed the risks, harms and costs of HIV/AIDS among injecting drug users and the effectiveness of harm reduction. Dr Alex Wodak, St. Vincent Hospital, Sydney, Australia stated: "There is overwhelming scientific evidence that a harm reduction package consisting of needle and syringe programmes, substitution treatment, and outreach interventions can prevent and even reverse an HIV/AIDS epidemic among injecting drug users. There is however an urgent need to review and revise drug policies to ensure that these approaches are implemented in time and on a sufficient scale to prevent further catastrophes."

The declaration calls for an intersectoral and comprehensive response, involving all levels of government and civil society organizations, including non-governmental organizations, organizations of people living with HIV/AIDS as well as current and former drug users. Martin Methot, Health Canada, said: "One of the most consistent features of HIV is its ability to cross borders." The delegates agreed that decisive policy action is needed at all levels for an effective response to the crisis of HIV/AIDS and injecting drug use.

The Policy Dialogue was organized by the Government of Poland, Health Canada, the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), the Open Society Institute and the Canadian International Development Agency. In attendance were representatives of UN agencies including, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), the World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).

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