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It's time Asia joined global debate on drug policy

POSITIVE SIGNS: There is a perceptible shift among decision-makers in the region to consider adopting harm-reduction programmes for drug reform and control, write Asma Jahangir and Michel Kazatchkine

DRUG POLICY reform used to be a topic avoided by most politicians. Now, however, there is a growing global consensus that the so-called "war on drugs" has failed. It has been ineffective in reducing drug use and it has reaped a devastating and counter productive impact on both human security and public health. Drug policy reform has now become the challenge policymakers can no longer hide from.

In Latin America, there is a dynamic political process in play looking into a range of alternatives to reduce violence and corruption related to the illegal drug market, such as decriminalisation of drug use, experiments with cannabis regulation and the adoption and implementation of harm reduction strategies.

Europe has for many years implemented large-scale harm reduction programmes that have drastically reduced the risk of HIV infection in people who inject drugs. Several countries in Europe, including Belgium, the Czech Republic, the Netherlands, Portugal and Switzerland, have adopted some form of decriminalisation policy.

It is highly significant then, that for the first time in 15 years, a United Nations General Assembly Special Session on Drugs has been scheduled for 2016 to review international drug control and related conventions.

It is time to bring this constructive political trend to Asia and make the debate truly global.

Asia remains home to a punitive approach to drugs that downplays public health and human rights

outcomes in favour of a zero tolerance ideology. Over half of the countries in the region maintain the death penalty for drug offences. Imprisonment and detention in compulsory centres for drug users remain the dominant response to drug use in the region and have been largely responsible for fuelling the spread of HIV and hepatitis C among people who inject drugs.

In countries such as Bangladesh, China, Indonesia, Japan, South Korea, Macau, Malaysia, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, the Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam, one in five people who injects drugs is living with HIV and two of three people who inject drugs worldwide are living with hepatitis C.

Nonetheless, there are recent positive signs in Asia that there is a shift amongst decision-makers towards consideration of more evidence-based approaches. Malaysia has closed its drug detention centres and is instead providing access to healthcare centres to people who use drugs.

The government's then controversial harm reduction programme introduced in 2006 has been hugely successful in curbing the HIV epidemic among only a few countries in the region have followed their lead and introduced needle and syringe programmes and medically assisted dependence treatment.

However, in many countries in the region the reality could not be more different: repressive policing, lack of supportive environments, prohibition of clean syringes and opioid substitution treatments like methadone and buprenorphine remain huge barriers to evidence-based harm reduction alternatives to the destructive drug policy status

quo.

Ending criminalisation of drug use and adopting appropriate harm reduction practices, such as clean needle supply, opioid substitution therapy and antiretroviral treatment as prevention, are fundamental steps to control HIV and hepatitis C epidemics in Asia.

There is an urgent need for Asian nations to engage in an international dialogue that encourages the development of more effective and health oriented drug policies that help to reduce the social harms of

criminalising drug users.

The evidence has long been in — harm reduction has put a major brake on injecting drug use driven HIV epidemics from emerging in so many parts of the world over the past 30 years and in the process saved countless lives.

Malaysia has been no exception and despite still having some way to go on broader drug policy reform, it is perhaps best placed to shine a light for other Asian countries on the road to adopting alternatives to the reckless war on drugs.

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The Global Commission on Drug Policy & the International AIDS Society are joint organisers of the High Level Panel on Drug Policy and Public Health this Sunday.