

PRESS RELEASE

Model Drug Law for West Africa presented to ministers of health on the sidelines of the 72nd session of the World Health Assembly

GENEVA, 22 May 2019—The West Africa Commission on Drugs, UNAIDS and the Global Commission on Drug Policy today presented the [Model Drug Law for West Africa](#) to ministers of health of the Economic Community of West African States.

Drug laws in western Africa are not having the intended effect. Neither drug use nor drug trafficking have been effectively reduced. Drug trafficking in western Africa has reached such an extent that the drug trade threatens stability in the region. Data from the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime from 2014 show that the use of cannabis in western Africa is much higher than globally—12.4% of people in the region had used cannabis in 2014, whereas only 3.9% of the global population had done so—and the problematic use of prescription and synthetic drugs is increasing. The rise in prison populations owing to pre-trial detention and drug-related offences has led to serious prison overcrowding in most countries.

“People who use drugs need help and care, not punishment. Stigmatizing them and locking them up in ever-increasing numbers only worsens health issues and puts enormous pressure on the already over-stretched criminal justice systems,” said Olusegun Obasanjo, former President of Nigeria and Chair of the West Africa Commission on Drugs. “It took our region years to adopt evidence-based policies regarding the response to HIV, and we are now enjoying life-saving successes every year. Our view is that drug policy needs the same pragmatic, health-based and people-centred approach as the HIV response.”

The model drug law provides concrete templates that countries can adapt to reform their drug laws—legal provisions and how they relate to international legal obligations—as well as useful commentary that explains different options and reasons for choosing the proposed legal solution. The model drug law offers a measured way for decriminalizing drug use and possession for personal use by introducing thresholds, thereby allowing people who use drugs to access health services and seek support. The model drug law acknowledges that barriers must also be removed so that the millions of people in need of health services, including people living with cancer or with HIV, can access the treatment and care they need.

“Countries need to take a human rights approach to HIV and drug use and to make sure that the health and well-being of people come first,” said Gunilla Carlsson, UNAIDS Executive Director, a.i., while presenting the report to the ministers of health on the margins of the seventy-second session of the World Health Assembly, being held in Geneva, Switzerland. “We know that harm reduction works, we know that decriminalization works—countries cannot continue to disregard the evidence and urgently need to take action.”

The widespread stigma and discrimination, violence and poor health faced by people who inject drugs are compounded by high rates of HIV. While the incidence of HIV infection globally

declined by 25% between 2010 and 2017, new HIV infections among people who inject drugs continue to rise. Of the 10.6 million people who injected drugs worldwide in 2016, more than half were living with hepatitis C, and one in eight were living with HIV.

International experience has shown that it is possible to muster the political will to make these wide-ranging changes to drug laws in order to address the spread of infectious diseases and their burden on development. Ruth Dreifuss, former President of Switzerland and Chair of the Global Commission on Drug Policy, said, “This is a defining moment where governments can turn the tide and control health epidemics by providing the right sets of prevention, treatment and harm reduction tools, or fail to do so if they maintain the prohibitionist status quo.”

[END]

Contact

Global Commission on Drug Policy | Eric Grant | tel. +41 79 124 1523 |
eric.grant@globalcommissionondrugs.org

UNAIDS | Sophie Barton-Knott | tel. +41 22 791 42 37 | bartonknotts@unaids.org

Global Commission on Drug Policy

The purpose of The Global Commission on Drug Policy is to bring to the international level an informed, science-based discussion about humane and effective ways to reduce the harm caused by drugs and drug control policies to people and societies.

West Africa Commission on Drugs

Convened by Kofi Annan, the West Africa Commission (WACD) on Drugs comprises a group of distinguished West Africans from the worlds of politics, civil society, health, security and the judiciary. The Commission, chaired by former President Olusegun Obasanjo of Nigeria, is an independent body and can therefore speak with impartiality and directness.

UNAIDS

The Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) leads and inspires the world to achieve its shared vision of zero new HIV infections, zero discrimination and zero AIDS-related deaths. UNAIDS unites the efforts of 11 UN organizations—UNHCR, UNICEF, WFP, UNDP, UNFPA, UNODC, UN Women, ILO, UNESCO, WHO and the World Bank—and works closely with global and national partners towards ending the AIDS epidemic by 2030 as part of the Sustainable Development Goals. Learn more at unaids.org and connect with us on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube.