

UN Health Chief Urges Shift from Drug War to New Policies

UN Expert Urges End to War on Drugs, Advocates for Harm-Reduction Policies

A United Nations expert on the right to health is calling for member nations to end the war on drugs and instead implement harm-reduction policies, including decriminalization, supervised consumption sites, drug checking, and the widespread availability of overdose reversal drugs like naloxone. This move comes as part of a broader push towards “alternative regulatory approaches” for currently controlled substances.

The Report’s Recommendations

The 19-page report by *Tlaleng Mofokeng*, the UN’s special rapporteur on the right to health, emphasizes the need for regulatory frameworks that are flexible and based on scientific evidence. Mofokeng, who is also a medical doctor and professor at Georgetown University’s Law School, argues that criminalization is an extreme option within regulatory systems and suggests that less restrictive models could potentially reduce overall harms.

“Criminalization is but a single—and extreme—option within a regulatory system,” Mofokeng states in the report. It recommends that countries “decriminalize the use, possession, purchase, and cultivation of drugs for personal use and move toward alternative regulatory approaches that put the protection of people’s health and other human rights front and center.”

Moving Away from Criminalization

The report urges a shift from criminal law to a human rights-based, evidence-based, and compassionate approach to harm reduction. This includes respecting people who use drugs and those affected by drug laws and policies.

“Efforts to enforce drug laws often cause more harm than good,” the report contends. It highlights various human rights violations resulting from the criminalization of drugs, such as overuse of incarceration, arbitrary deprivation of life, unnecessary use of lethal force, and the application of the death penalty.

Practical Harm Reduction Measures

Mofokeng’s report lists several practical harm reduction measures that member states have already begun to implement. These include:

- Needle and syringe programs
- Medication-assisted treatment for opioid dependence
- Safe injection sites
- Drug checking

- Overdose prevention and reversal programs

The report also advocates for ensuring that basic needs such as housing, employment, and education are not conditional on the discontinuation of drug use.

Funding and Implementation Challenges

The report points out that global funding for harm reduction is “inadequate and shrinking.” Only \$131 million is currently available for harm reduction in low- and middle-income countries, with less than 7 percent of international donor funding going to community-led harm reduction organizations. This results in a significant funding gap of 95 percent.

Inequitable Impacts of Drug Policing

Mofokeng draws attention to the disproportionate impacts of drug law enforcement on marginalized groups, including individuals experiencing homelessness or poverty, those with mental health issues, sex workers, women, children, LGBTIQ+ persons, Black persons, Indigenous Peoples, migrants, incarcerated individuals, people with disabilities, and those living with HIV, tuberculosis, or hepatitis.

“The enforcement of drug laws and policies compounds other forms of discrimination and disproportionately affects certain individuals,” Mofokeng said in her statement to the UN’s Human Rights Council.

Support from Human Rights Organizations

Human rights organization Amnesty International praised the report for advocating a harm reduction and human rights-based approach to drug policy. Erika Guevara-Rosas, Amnesty International’s senior director for research, advocacy, policy, and campaigns, emphasized the need to abandon the failed policies of the war on drugs.

“This is a bold and urgent call on governments worldwide to finally abandon the manifestly failed policies of the so-called ‘war on drugs,’” Guevara-Rosas said. “Governments must consign the ‘war on drugs’ to history and start implementing all the recommendations outlined in this report.”

Broader International Context

The UN report aligns with recent shifts in international and national drug policies. Last year, 19 Latin American and Caribbean nations issued a joint statement acknowledging the need to rethink the global war on drugs. A report from an international coalition of advocacy groups found that global drug prohibition has fueled environmental destruction, undermining efforts to address the climate crisis.

In 2019, the UN Chief Executives Board, which represents 31 UN agencies, adopted a position urging member states to pursue science-based, health-oriented drug policies, specifically recommending decriminalization.

The UN report from *Tlaleng Mofokeng* is a significant step towards reshaping global drug policies. By advocating for harm reduction and decriminalization, the report aims to address the failures of the war on drugs and promote a more humane and effective approach to drug use and drug use disorders.

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