



**International Day against Drug Abuse and Illicit Trafficking**  
26 June 2024

## **Shift from punitive approach on drug policies towards harm reduction**

### *Statement by UN human rights experts*

For years, UN human rights experts have documented the devastating human rights and health impacts of drug policies over reliance on punishment, criminalisation and militarisation. On World Drugs Day 2024, we call for transformative change in drug policy, by shifting from punishment towards harm reduction.

The 'war on drugs' has resulted in a range of serious human rights violations, as documented by a number of UN human rights experts over the years, and highlighted in the OHCHR's [report](#) regarding the human rights implications of drug policies. These widespread abuses have included compulsory drug detention in the name of 'treatment', over incarceration and related prison overcrowding, the ongoing use of the death penalty for drug offences, killings, enforced disappearances and the ongoing lack of, and unequal access to treatment, harm reduction and essential medicines. In addition, the UN Special Rapporteur on toxics and human rights has expressed his concerns around the use and aerial spraying of the toxic pesticide glyphosate in the so-called 'war on drugs'.

Echoing the theme of this year's World Drug Day 'The evidence is clear: Invest in prevention', we collectively urge Member States and all UN entities to put evidence and communities at the centre of drug policies, by shifting from punishment towards support, and invest in the full array of evidence-based health interventions for people who use drugs, ranging from prevention to harm reduction, treatment and aftercare, emphasizing the need for a voluntary basis and in full respect of human rights norms and standards.

We note and welcome the inclusion of the term 'harm reduction' for the very first time in a [resolution](#) adopted by the UN Commission on Narcotic Drugs. Endorsing a harm reduction approach to drug use is all the more important as one in eight people who inject drugs are currently living with HIV, representing 1.6 million people, an issue that is highly relevant for the Human Rights Council as Member States are negotiating this year's resolution on HIV/AIDS.

As highlighted by the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention in its [Study on Arbitrary Detention](#) relating to Drug Policies, the 'war on drugs' has particularly affected women and girls and marginalised groups, including people living in poverty, young people, people of African Descent, Indigenous Peoples, minorities, LGBTQIA+ people, migrants, and sex workers. Many of those detained in connection with the 'war on drugs' become older persons while subjected to inadequate conditions due to the length of drug-related sentences. In the past year, these disproportionate impacts have been emphasized, thanks to the tireless efforts of activists and several initiatives led by UN entities focusing on health and human rights.

On Monday 24 June, the UN Special Rapporteur on the right to health presented her landmark report '[Drug use, harm reduction and the right to health](#)', which notes that over-criminalisation, stigmatisation and discrimination linked to drug use represent structural barriers leading to poorer health outcomes.

The UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights continues to raise the human rights consequences of drug policies, including the negative impacts of drug testing in schools, emphasizing how this disproportionately affects the right to education for students from disadvantaged and marginalised groups; the involuntary rehabilitation of detainees and ongoing lack of access to harm reduction, which severely impacts the right to health; as well as the harmful effects of criminalisation on people who use drugs.

We welcome initiatives by the World Health Organization's Expert Committee on Drug Dependence to examine and address colonial legacies in relation to drug policy with a view to better protecting the rights of Indigenous Peoples, including in relation to ancestral cultural, spiritual and religious practices.

Civil society and communities directly affected by drug policies have been instrumental in monitoring and denouncing human rights violations committed in the name of drug control, as well as in designing and delivering programmes and services that best respond to the needs of the people they serve — including the full array of evidence-based health interventions mentioned above. We urge Member States to meaningfully engage civil society organisations, people who use drugs, affected communities and youth in the design, implementation and evaluation of drug policies, to ensure that their knowledge and experiences are considered.

The international community must seek to address and reverse the damage brought about by decades of a global 'war on drugs'. We note that states of exception and the militarization of law enforcement in the context of the 'war on drugs' continue to facilitate the commission of multiple and serious human rights violations. In view of the range of

human rights violations that the 'war on drugs' has entailed and echoing the recommendations of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, we collectively call for an end to the militarisation of drug policy, overincarceration and prison overcrowding, the use of the death penalty for drug offences, and policies that disproportionately impact marginalised groups.

As we did in [2022](#) and [2023](#), we call on Member States and all UN entities to ground their drug policy responses in international human rights law and standards, including the [International Guidelines on Human Rights and Drug Policy](#) and the [UN System Common Position on drugs](#).

The UN, Member States and the international community as a whole should shift from punishment towards support, through a gender-responsive harm reduction approach, the decriminalisation of drug use and related activities, and the responsible regulation of all drugs to eliminate profits from illegal trafficking, criminality and violence.

ENDS

**Matthew Gillett** (Chair), **Ganna Yudkivska** (Vice-Chair on Communications), **Priya Gopalan** (Vice-Chair on Follow-Up), **Miriam Estrada-Castillo** and **Mumba Malila**, [Working Group on Arbitrary Detention](#);  
**Aua Baldé** (Chair-Rapporteur), **Gabriella Citroni** (Vice-Chair), **Grażyna Baranowska**, **Ana Lorena Delgadillo Pérez** and **Angkhana Neelapaijit**, [Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances](#);  
**Gina Romero**, [Special Rapporteur on the Rights to Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and of Association](#);  
**Cecilia M Bailliet**, [Independent Expert on human rights and international solidarity](#);  
**Javaid Rehman**, [Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran](#);  
**Farida Shaheed**, [Special Rapporteur on the right to education](#);  
**Michael Fakhri**, [Special Rapporteur on the right to food](#);  
**George Katrougalos**, [Independent Expert on the promotion of a democratic and equitable international order](#);  
**Tomoya Obokata**, [Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery, including its causes and consequences](#);  
**Nicolas Levrat**, [Special Rapporteur on Minority issues](#);  
**Tlaleng Mofokeng**, [Special Rapporteur on the right of everyone to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health](#);  
**Marcos A. Orellana**, [Special Rapporteur on the implications for human rights of the environmentally sound management and disposal of hazardous substances and wastes](#);  
**José Francisco Cali Tzay**, [Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples](#);

**Ashwini K.P., Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance;**

**Morris Tidball-Binz, Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions;**

**Graeme Reid, Independent Expert on protection against violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity;**

**Claudia Mahler, Independent Expert on the enjoyment of all human rights by older persons;**

**Dorothy Estrada Tanck (Chair), Laura Nyirinkindi (Vice-Chair), Claudia Flores, Ivana Krstić, and Haina Lu, Working group on discrimination against women and girls;**

**Olivier De Schutter, Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights**

**Barbara G. Reynolds (Chair), Bina D'Costa, Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent;**

**Siobhán Mullally, Special Rapporteur on trafficking in persons, especially women and children.**