



## “Drugs and HIV/AIDS in the context of international development”

### Drugs and HIV/AIDS

Worldwide, some 40 million people are living with HIV or AIDS. Between 5 and 10 percent of all HIV infections can be traced to intravenous drug use. It is primarily the use of drugs that accounts for the rapid progress of the epidemic in developing and transition countries – especially in Asia and Eastern Europe, where it constitutes a growing obstacle to development.

#### Trends in drug use

Some 185 million people throughout the world used illegal drugs in 2004. The number of injecting drug users is estimated at about 10 million. Nearly 80% of intravenous drug use occurs in developing countries, especially in Eastern Europe and Asia. Abuse of drugs often leads to health or social problems for individuals, communities and governments and is becoming a growing burden to developing countries. It is often assumed that only the Western industrialised countries suffer the consequences of drug abuse, but this is by no means the case.

#### Injecting drug users

The sharing of needles and syringes may not be the most common means of transmitting HIV/AIDS, but it is certainly the most effective: the rate of transmission of HIV among injecting drug users has been known to rise in the course of just one to two years from 0 to 50-60 percent. Lack of information about the precise risks involved and the exact manner of transmission play as great a role here as does inadequate access to health services. For example, needle and syringe exchange programmes are as rare in developing and transition countries as HIV tests, condoms and specialised medical treatment. Drug-related crime, especially prostitution, and the generally greater readiness of drug users to involve in risky behaviour are further reasons for the rapid spread of the epidemic.

#### HIV/AIDS and drug use

There are clear regional differences in the spread of HIV through intravenous drug use. Currently about 110 countries are affected. The greatest impact is to be seen in Eastern Europe and Asia, where the HIV/AIDS epidemic is spreading rapidly due to intravenous drug use.

#### Africa

Well over half of all persons afflicted with HIV live in Africa, most of them south of the Sahara. The main mode of transmission there is unprotected sexual intercourse, with the consumption of drugs or alcohol increasing the probability of this form of risky sexual behaviour. However, in some of the countries of northern Africa, such as Libya, intravenous drug use has now become the main mode of transmission.

#### Latin America and the Caribbean

Some 1.6 million people are now living with HIV in Latin America and the Caribbean. The HIV/AIDS epidemic is spreading particularly rapidly in the Caribbean. In this case, however, the use of drugs still plays a smaller role in HIV/AIDS transmission than in other regions of the world. Exceptions are Argentina and Uruguay, where transmission occurs primarily through the shared use of hypodermic needles.

#### South-, South-East and East Asia

About 8.2 million people in South, South-East and East Asia are living with HIV/AIDS. In this region a rapid increase in intravenous drug use and HIV infection is discernable. HIV is spread primarily by vulnerable groups such as sex workers and injecting drug users (IDUs). This also applies to countries which have so far witnessed no or little HIV occurrence, such as China, Vietnam and Myanmar. In 2000 and 2001, 60 to 70 percent of new infections could be traced to intravenous drug use.

#### Central Asia and Eastern Europe

About 3.2 million injecting drug users live in Central Asia and Eastern Europe, with significant variations in numbers from region to region.

## Harm reduction

Harm reduction is the main instrument in HIV prevention and prevention of death from drugs among injecting drug users. The most important elements are:

- Outreach programmes/workers for drug users
- Access to sterile needles/syringes and to condoms
- Low-threshold drug and HIV counselling
- Substance substitution programmes
- Safer use/safer sex information and counselling
- Drug user survival counselling

The rate of new HIV infections in this region is about 20 times that of Western Europe. Ukraine and Russia currently evidence the highest increase in HIV incidents in the world. The main source of transmission here is drug use, particularly the sharing of injection paraphernalia. In Central Asian countries, too – many of which lie along the trafficking routes for opiates from Afghanistan to Europe – the drug/HIV complex is becoming a major societal problem. In these countries, between 30 and 90 percent of HIV infections have occurred as a result of intravenous drug use.

## Youth

Young injecting drug users are especially hard hit by HIV/AIDS, in particular in Eastern Europe and Central Asia. The reasons for this are their limited awareness of the dangers and long-term effects of intravenous drug use, inadequate health education, limited access to health services and a lack of trust in health services staff. The financing of drugs is also more difficult for the young, so that prostitution is particularly common among boys and girls.

## Challenges for development cooperation

The drugs and HIV/AIDS issue has a growing impact on the economic and social development of developing and transition countries. This is clearly evidenced in the states formerly belonging to the USSR. Economic and political restructuring have resulted in a lack of future prospects, unemployment and poor social infrastructure, which account for higher rates of drug use there. The high prevalence of HIV/AIDS is also due to these changes, since reconstitution of public health systems has virtually deprived a large portion of the population of access to health services and information, with wide-ranging consequences for the development of these countries. HIV/AIDS has further reduced the already low life expectancy in Eastern Europe by as much as 10 years. Finally, the spread of the epidemic has resulted in a shortage of the labour needed for the economy and development.

## Development-oriented Drug Control

A complex issue such as drugs and HIV/AIDS calls for sustainable, long-term and cross-sectoral intervention. In addition to prevention and treatment of addiction and the rehabilitation of drug users, harm reduction has gained support among international organisations in recent years. It has proved to be an important instrument for drug control. For example, the UN special session on HIV/AIDS in 2001 resolved that all member countries were to have harm reduction programmes by 2005. The Development-oriented Drug Control programme, instituted by the German government in 2003, also provides for the support of partner countries in developing drug prevention and assistance programmes, including harm reduction.



Despite these favourable framework conditions, harm reduction often remains difficult to implement politically. In many countries, decision-makers continue to favour exclusively repressive measures against drug users; and many societies continue to fear that harm reduction measures will only increase drug use, even though this is demonstrably not the case.

GTZ's Development-oriented Drug Control (DDC) programme tests various harm reduction measures on a pilot basis and provides technical support for their implementation as part of other health promotion and health system services. It also promotes dialogue on drug policy in partner countries.

More information: [www.gtz.de/drogen](http://www.gtz.de/drogen)



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