HUMAN RIGHTS AND DRUG POLICY
ASIA*: SUCCESSES, CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

There are **more than 102 MILLION** people who use drugs in Asia.

**4.35 MILLION** people inject drugs.

**11 MILLION** use amphetamines.

In 2019, people who inject drugs accounted for **17%** of new HIV infections in the region. There are **1.8 million people with recent injecting drug use living with hepatitis C antibodies in Asia. This accounts for 30% of the global prevalence.**

**48% drugs**

**52% other**

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Over **400,000** people are detained in compulsory drug detention centres in Asia.

In **January 2017**, the Narcotics Act of Thailand was **amended to reduce penalties for the possession, production, import and export of narcotics** and, in 2018, the Ministry of Public Health took over responsibility for drug treatment services from the Ministry of Justice.

There are **no known needle and syringe programmes in prisons** in the region. **Opioid agonist therapy is offered in a limited number of closed settings in Afghanistan, India, Indonesia, Malaysia and Vietnam.**

Between March and June 2020, **eight countries in the region committed in some way to providing early release of prisoners in response to the COVID-19 pandemic**, including people charged with drug offences.

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**CRIMINAL JUSTICE**

Human Rights and Drug Policy Guideline II, 5; Everyone has the inherent right to life.

16 of the 35 countries that retain the death penalty for drug offences are in Asia.

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HEALTH

Human Rights and Drug Policy Guideline II, 1; Everyone has the right to enjoy the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health.

14 countries/territories in the region provide some sort of needle and syringe programmes and opioid agonist therapy but quality, coverage and accessibility vary widely and often remain inadequate or uneven where these are available.

Out of seven countries in the region, only in Vietnam does the government provide moderate investment in harm reduction. All other governments provide low investment.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, SEVEN countries in the region have taken steps to ensure access to opioid agonist therapy.

WOMEN

Human Rights and Drug Policy Guideline III, 2; Women have the right to enjoy human rights and fundamental freedoms on a non-discriminatory basis in all fields of life on the basis of equality with men.

Women who use drugs, who are involved in the illicit drug trade or who are dependent on illicit economies confront distinct forms of discrimination to men, heightening risk of sexual and gender-based violence, HIV, hepatitis C and overdose. They are also more likely to have their children removed from their care and custody than men.

Women face more barriers to accessing drug-related health services than men and are underserved by harm reduction programmes, most of which are designed for and by men.

DEVELOPMENT

Human Rights and Drug Policy Guideline II, 1.4; States should ensure a safe, clean, healthy, and sustainable environment to respect, protect, and fulfil human rights, including the rights to health and to an adequate standard of living.

Illicit crop cultivation is common in Asia. Opium poppy cultivation accounts for over 80% of the estimated 10,500 tons of opium produced globally (over 75% in Afghanistan and 5% in Myanmar).

The environmental impacts of drug control and the drug trade are ever present in the region. Aerial fumigation, deforestation, monocropping and environmental contamination all have been documented.

Thailand virtually eliminated opium cultivation through a non-coercive approach, through which farmers were supported to develop viable alternative livelihoods prior to destruction of opium poppies. This was part of a comprehensive and long-term development strategy that included improving access to basic services and schools, job diversification and the protection of the environment. Similar efforts are being implemented in Lao PDR and Myanmar.

References:


* In this document, “Asia” refers to East, South and Southeast Asia, as in the Global State of Harm Reduction 2020.