

South Asia Regional Civil Society Consultation – towards UNGASS 2016

31st October 2015, New Delhi, India



Summary

The South Asia Regional Civil Society Consultation for the UNGASS 2016 was held on the 31st October 2015 in New Delhi. 18 Civil Society Representatives from six countries working in the field of drug prevention and harm reduction were a part of this meeting organized by **India HIV/AIDS Alliance, ADIC Sri Lanka and supported by UNODC-ROSA, New York NGO Committee on Drugs and Vienna NGO Committee on Drugs (VNGOC).**

Background

The UN General Assembly will hold a Special Session (UNGASS) on drugs in 2016. This Special Session will be an important milestone in achieving the goals set in the policy document of 2009 "Political Declaration and Plan of Action on International Cooperation towards an Integrated and Balanced Strategy to Counter the World Drug Problem", which defined action to be taken by Member States as well as goals to be achieved by 2019.

The South Asia Regional Civil Society Consultation is a part of the preparation process for the UNGASS 2016.

The South Asia Regional Civil Society Consultation meeting

Inaugural session:

The Regional consultation meeting commenced with a welcome address by **Ms Sonal Mehta**, Director India HIV/AIDS Alliance. She gave an overview of the work of her organization, and stressed on the need to focus on harm reduction in the South Asian region. Following this, **Ms Cristina Albertin**, Representative of UNODC Regional office for South Asia, highlighted the need for civil societies to engage in policy development related to drug issues. She opined that though a lot of work is being put in on the HIV front, there is a need to focus on demand reduction and prevention strategies. **Mr. Pubudu Sumanasekara and Dr. M. Suresh Kumar** gave an overview about the aim, objectives and outcome of the regional consultation for the UNGASS 2016 on drugs.

The key highlights from the discussions:

- 1. Drug Use and Young People:** The first technical session was on 'Drug Use and Young People'. Speakers for this session were **Rashmila Shakya** and **Pubudu Sumanasekara**, and was chaired by **Dr M Suresh Kumar**. This session discussed the vulnerability of young people to drugs, and the importance of engaging with the youth, while taking their social and political environment into consideration. Additionally, it was recommended that as Sri Lanka is focussing on 'drug prevention and awareness programmes' in schools, their strategies, experiences and lessons learned should be shared with the other countries.
- 2. Ex & Current Drug User Community** – Speakers for this session were **Mahesh, Anand Pun & Abou Mere**, with the chair **Mr. Charan**. This session focussed on the balance between the access to and control of essential medicines and drugs, and the need for drug policies to incorporate health centred services for drug users. It highlighted the importance of ex-users and current users being a part of the demand reduction and harm reduction programmes with good practices prevalent in India and Nepal.
- 3. Drugs and Health** – This session was chaired by **Ms Sonal Mehta**, with the speakers being **Fatimath Afiya, Wangda Dorji, Rashmila Shakya**. Through this session, it was reinforced that there is an urgent need for shelter homes and foster homes for children and women. Also, focus should be given for decreasing the stigma and discrimination faced by female drug users, with drug policies being gender sensitive.

4. **Drugs and Health** – Speakers for this session were **Kinley Tenzin, Nazim Ahmed** and **Rishi Raj Ojha**. It was chaired by **Mr. Anand Pun**. The increasing prevalence of HIV, TB, Hep C and Overdose related deaths among PWID was a concern. In this scenario, it is urgent that the civil society groups actively advocate with pharmaceutical companies to reduce Hep C treatment cost. While India and Nepal are already doing it, this experience can be shared with other countries. It was further recommended that OST services should be scaled up in order to reduce even the prevalence of Hep C.
5. **Drugs and Human Rights** – The session, which was chaired by **Mr. Simon W Beddoe**, had **Kinley Tenzin, Nazim Ahmed, Rishi Raj Ojha** as speakers. It highlighted that drug policies, as in the case of Bhutan's recently amended Narcotic Drugs, Psychotropic Substances and Substance Abuse Act (NDPSSA) 2015, should be sensitive to the rights of drug users. It was shared that in Maldives, drug laws are especially strict because of political situation and religious dogmas. Also, there is a need to educate the community on the harms and consequences of risky drug use practices. There was a need to focus on prisons through health interventions.

The way forward

The main recommendations that were brought forth through the consultation were:

- Engage young people while formulating policies on drugs
- Social and cultural factors should be considered while framing drug policies. With a focus on engagement with families
- Ex and current drug users are meaningfully engaged in Demand reduction and harm reduction programmes. This must be promoted and enhanced.
- Women face triple stigma, hence it is crucial that women's needs are centred upon. Child care and health care for women should be a specific focus.
- Hepatitis C prevention should not be neglected while talking about drug use. HCV Diagnostic and treatment facilities made accessible. Community should work together with government and pharmaceutical companies.
- Alternatives to incarceration must be promoted. Depenalisation for drug use and possession for personal use.
- Evidence based and rights centred comprehensive treatment should be available for all.
- Prison populations must be prioritised.

These recommendations were written up for submission and document is added in annexure.

Annexure - List of participants

Name	Organisation	Country
Mr ANANDA PUN	Recovering Nepal	Kathmandu, Nepal
Ms Rashmila Shakya	CWIN Nepal	Kathmandu, Nepal
Mr Rishi Raj Ojha	Nepal NGO Society	Kathmandu, Nepal
Mr. Kinley Tenzin	Youth Development Fund	Bhutan
Ms. WagdaDorjii	LHAK-SAM (ALTRUISM)	Bhutan
Dr. Abul Hossain Sheikh	CARE Bangladesh	Bangladesh
Ms. FathimathAfiya	Society for women against Drugs	Maldives
Nazim Ahmed	JOURNEY NGO	Maldives
Pubudu Sumanasekara	ADIC - SA Regional Rep CSTF	Srilanka (Regional)
Mahesh Nissanka	ADIC (Alcohol and Drug Information Center)	Srilanka
Abou Mere	IDUF - Chair	India
Dr. M Suresh Kumar	Facilitator	India
Sonal Mehta	India HIV/AIDS Alliance	India
G. Charanjit Sharma	Alliance India - Member UNODC CSO Regional Drugs & HIV Group	India (Regional)
Simon W Beddoe	Alliance India SA Regional Rep CSTF	India (Regional)

Special invitees:

UNODC-ROSA: Ms Cristina Albertin, Mr Kunal Kishore, Mr G. Srinivas & Dr Alpna Mittal

UNAIDS: Mr Oussama Tawil

India HIV/AIDS Alliance: Mr James Robertson

South Asia Regional Civil Society Consultation

Statement of Recommendations for UNGASS 2016

Background

The UN General Assembly will hold a Special Session (UNGASS) on drugs in 2016. This Special Session will be an important milestone in achieving the goals set in the policy document of 2009 "Political Declaration and Plan of Action on International Cooperation towards an Integrated and Balanced Strategy to Counter the World Drug Problem", which defined action to be taken by Member States as well as goals to be achieved by 2019. The UNGASS 2016 process represents one of the highest-level platforms from which to influence the strategic direction and content of drug policies. The process is designed to ensure meaningful participation and open dialogue with special attention given to civil society and affected populations. The Civil Society Task Force (CSTF) was set up in Dec 2014 to facilitate civil society participation and prioritize engagement with representatives from the most affected communities through regional consultations with civil society representatives to support the activities and presentations for UNGASS 2016.

The South Asia Regional Civil Society Consultation was organized by India HIV/AIDS Alliance & ADIC Sri Lanka on 31st October 2015 with support from UNODC-ROSA, New York NGO Committee on Drugs and Vienna NGO Committee on Drugs (VNGOC) as a part of the preparation process. The consultation included civil society & affected community representatives from six countries i.e. Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Maldives, Sri Lanka and India in the South Asia region. The participants represented NGOs engaged in Prevention, Treatment, Harm Reduction, Drug User Groups, People Living with HIV/AIDS as well as NGOs working with Women and Children. The consultation was based on the broad themes of Drugs & Health; Drugs & Crime; Human rights, Women and Children. The results of the consultation were a specific set of recommendations as follows:

1. Drugs and Health

We are concerned about the rising incidence and prevalence of HIV and Hepatitis C among People Who Use Drugs in the South Asian region. Diagnostics and treatment services continue to be a public health challenge in many of our countries.

We urge member states to prioritise the implementation of the WHO recommended 9 interventions that include access to treatment using drug substitution therapies for People Who Use Drugs including in prison settings. Considering that many countries in our region have more than one arm of government involved in drug control, prevention and treatment and the complexity of a unified approach to drugs notwithstanding, **we recommend** member states agree on a unified approach to people who use drugs that is grounded in public health.

2. Drugs and Crime

We call on member states to abolish criminalisation of drug users and provide alternatives to sentencing and incarceration of people who use drugs. As an alternative to

criminalization, drug policies that enable an environment conducive to deliver essential health services to drug users are worth investing in.

We recommend the creation of a fine balance between ensuring access to and control over drugs thereby ensuring the mitigation of barriers to accessing essential health services. A number of countries in our region have some very harsh drug laws and policies that not only infringe upon the right to health of individuals who use illicit drugs but have also impacted upon crime and therefore in incarceration rates. However many countries across the world are reforming their drug policies towards alternatives to sentencing and referral/diversion to treatment.

We look to member states to ensure similar approaches for our region.

3. Human Rights, Women and Children

Prevalent stigma surrounding drugs has disproportionately affected women and children and there is a need for a more gender sensitive and scientific approach to drug use among this highly marginalised population. Due to the nature of society in the South Asian region, stigma related to drug use coupled with the systemic discrimination of women have contributed to high levels of vulnerability.

We rely on member states to develop policies and implement programs that address this issue through evidence based rights centred approach and that due attention be given to early intervention strategies among young people and women that have proven results.

4. Other Issues

We believe that it is imperative to empower and engage both Recovered/Ex drug users and current drug users at the levels of policy development and program implementation. This has been the key to augmenting both the Demand Reduction and Harm Reduction programme in a number of South Asian countries.

We urge member states to adopt a similar approach by investing in affected communities that compliment interventions in order to effectively address the drug problem.

In conclusion, South Asian civil society appreciates the opportunity to provide these recommendations; and looks forward to meaningfully engage with member states in the lead up to and the UNGASS 2016 itself.

Organisations and Individuals that have contributed:

Nepal - Recovering Nepal; CWIN Nepal; Nepal NGO Society

Bhutan - Youth Development Fund; LHAK-SAM (ALTRUISM)

Bangladesh - CARE Bangladesh

Maldives - Society for Women Against Drugs (SWAD); Journey NGO

Sri Lanka - ADIC (Alcohol and Drug Information Center)

India - Indian Drug Users Forum; India HIV/AIDS Alliance & Dr M Suresh Kumar (as Facilitator for the consultation)