



Reflections on Harm Reduction: 2011

Harm Reduction 2011, the 22nd annual international harm reduction conference, was held in Beirut, Lebanon in April. The five-day event represented the first time that the conference had been staged in the Middle East, and it brought together over 800 delegates from 79 countries to discuss, debate, share and advocate for harm reduction policies and practices. The event represented a significant success for harm reduction in the region, as well as for the International Harm Reduction Association (IHRA) and its conference partners.



The conference opening set a high bar for the week, as keynote Speaker Joanne Csete of Columbia University gave an impassioned, inspiring and ground-breaking speech. Drawing lessons from the struggles of women in the context of reproductive rights and reproductive health justice, Csete named and challenged the legal and policy barriers preventing people who use drugs from being able to advance their rights to health, and to be free from other human rights abuses, and called for the development of a new paradigm she called 'drug policy justice'.

The theme of the 2011 conference was 'Building capacity, redressing neglect', and to reflect this theme the programme contained a number of innovations over previous years, both in organisation and in content. In recognition of the need to build harm reduction capacity in the MENA region, a three-day workshop, demonstration and training stream was introduced into this year's conference programme. These informal and interactive workshops were well attended by delegates from all over the globe, and are set to become a vital component of future IHRA conferences. Highlights from this year's training sessions were included overdose prevention training, implementing harm reduction in prisons, and developing and improving hepatitis C treatment services.

This year's 'Dialogue Space' offered delegates an opportunity to engage in a less formal and more interactive programme of events. Highlights included Portugal's national drugs coordinator, Joao Castel-Branco Goulao, discussing how decriminalisation became part of the country's drug strategy. During the session he underscored many favourable indicators including a clear decrease in drug use among 15-17 year olds and a decrease in HIV transmission. Other highlights included the International Network of People who use Drugs (INPUD) discussion on structural violence, stigma and discrimination and a book launch of a new manual 'Harm Reduction at Work' offering guidance to people who use drugs who want to work, and employers who want to hire them.



This year's conference saw a strong track and discussion on women and harm reduction, including two major and two concurrent sessions focussing on issues related to women, drug use and harm reduction. Topics discussed included pregnancy, building a women-centred harm reduction response and barriers to access for women who use drugs. A key issue discussed was the need to overcome stereotypes in order to respond to the needs of women who use drugs, drawing on experiences of working with women in Eastern Europe. Research showed that women had a greater history of sexual and physical violence, demonstrating the importance of creating a safe and participatory atmosphere to draw them into services.

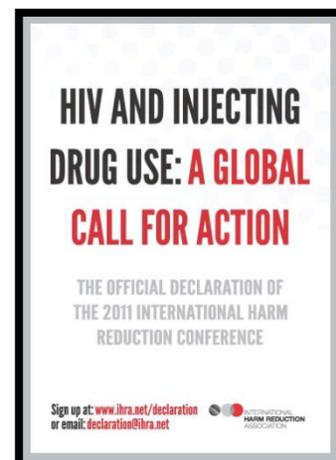


Improving harm reduction services for women in resource-constrained settings was another key issue discussed. Poverty, as well as weak healthcare systems in some countries, resulted in women being unable to attend services at all. Gender specific guidelines and targeted measures are needed that are specific to national and local contexts. Systemic barriers are often in place preventing women from accessing harm reduction services, which

include a lack of knowledge about specialist treatment and concern about the punitive nature of services, as well as attitudes of many service providers themselves. Many of these sessions brought to light extreme violence faced by women who use drugs.

Another area of focus in this year's programme was on sex work and harm reduction. Sex workers and people who use drugs across the globe are confronted with similar human rights abuses, stigmatization and share similar problems accessing treatment or healthcare. Like many marginalized groups, sex workers are often referred to as a "hard to reach" community. Sex worker activists at the IHRA conference challenged this thinking, and instead highlighted poorly designed programmes that failed to effectively engage sex worker communities in their development and implementation. If sex workers aren't being reached by services, then service providers must ask the question - what do they need to do differently? This is something that the harm reduction community has successfully achieved and an area in which sex workers wish to engage, collaborate and exchange experiences.

The IHRA conference coincided with the week of civil society hearings held in New York to inform the proceedings of the [2011 United Nations High Level Meeting on HIV/AIDS](#), to be held from 8-10th June. This High Level Meeting is one of the key international fora through which to advance progress on harm reduction and related drug policy reform. Ten years since the UN General Assembly Special Session on HIV/AIDS, world leaders and civil society representatives will come together to review progress and chart the future course of the global AIDS response at the 2011 UN General Assembly High Level Meeting on AIDS. At this meeting, Member States are expected to adopt a new Declaration that will reaffirm current commitments and commit to actions to guide and sustain the global AIDS response.



Because of this context, and the urgent need to scale up HIV-related harm reduction worldwide, the 2011 IHRA conference marked the first time that event released an advocacy declaration, '**HIV and**

Injecting Drug Use: A Global Call to Action'. Launched during the opening session by Executive Director, Rick Lines, the Declaration calls on world leaders to honour their commitments on HIV/AIDS for people who inject drugs worldwide. The Declaration provides a clear platform for mobilising a broad constituency of civil society organisations and governments in support of evidence-based harm reduction interventions, as well as drug policy reform as outlined in the Vienna Declaration released at the IAS conference in 2010, and aims to raise the profile of these issues within the proceedings and outputs of the United Nations High Level Meeting. To date, the Declaration has been endorsed by over 130 organisations and was featured in the [Lancet](#). If you wish to endorse the Declaration please do so by visiting the Harm Reduction International [website](#).

The conference closing session also contained a number of memorable highlights. One was the keynote speech of Dr Donya Aziz. Dr Aziz is a member of the National Assembly of Pakistan, where she has been



a leader on HIV issues and on women's rights. She gave an enlightening speech on the challenges and opportunities of working to promote HIV and harm reduction issues among elected officials, and gave the audience a number of concrete strategies for engaging with leaders, both within the MENA region and beyond. Another highlight was the launch the Middle East and North Africa Network of People who Use Drugs, which had coalesced during the conference. Several members of the newly formed group were given the stage to read out their just-drafted mission and vision statements. This newly-formed network will promote the health

and defend the rights of people who use drugs in and around the MENA region, and work closely with the International Network of People who Use Drugs.

The close of Harm Reduction: 2011, also closed one chapter in the history of the International Harm Reduction Association, and opened a new one. At the conclusion of an eventful and exciting week, it was announced that IHRA would henceforth be known as **Harm Reduction International**. The name change was announced by John-Peter Kools, Chair of the Board of Directors, and reflects the evolution and multi-faceted nature of the organisation of the 15 years since its foundation. Beginning life as a sort of professional network of harm reductionists, today Harm Reduction International is one of the leading international NGOs working on harm reduction research, policy, human rights, civil society collaboration and advocacy. The new name reflects this evolution, and the new status of the organisation.



- Harm Reduction 2011 was held in Beirut, Lebanon from 3rd – 7th April. For more information, photos and videos please visit: <http://www.ihra.net/conference>. Presentations from the conference will be available on the Harm Reduction International website soon.
- Harm Reduction 2012; Harm Reduction International's 23rd International Conference (HR:2012) will be held in Adelaide, Australia between the 6th – 10th May 2012. More information and details about HR:2012 will be available on the HRI website shortly, alternatively please contact: info@ihra.net for any other enquiries.