MEDIA RELEASE

Indonesian academics and experts call for an evidence-based public health response to drugs in Indonesia

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Thursday, June 5, 2015 (Jakarta, Indonesia) – In an open letter to Indonesian President Joko Widodo, published in the leading health journal The Lancet, a group of prominent Indonesian academics and experts have called on the government to commit to proven public health approaches to address drug use, and to urgently discontinue strategies which have been found counterproductive such as involuntary rehabilitation and the death penalty.

“The Indonesian government has shown increased commitment to addressing drug use and guaranteeing the well-being of its citizens, but in order to achieve this it must choose public health and harm reduction strategies. The current drug war approach has been a proven failure around the globe, even causing more harm than good,” said Professor Dr Irwanto of the HIV and AIDS Research Centre at Atma Jaya University and veteran drug and HIV researcher in the country.

“We know what works: we already have the evidence and have been implementing health-focused programmes that work in Indonesia since the early 2000s. We have an ethical obligation to provide our citizens with options that save lives, such as needle syringe programmes, opioid substitution therapy and community-based, voluntary drug treatment. But despite the proven success of these interventions, political commitment and funds are lacking, and current punitive strategies in Indonesia do not provide enough space for meaningful health programs. Our limited funds are instead being used to bolster fear-based approaches, which effectively drive people in need further away from health programs,” said Dr Ignatius Praptoraharjo, Researcher at the Center for Health Policy and Management in the Faculty of Medicine at Gadjah Mada University.

The group of experts question the validity of the estimates of drug use frequently used to suggest Indonesia is in the grip of a national drug emergency requiring a large-scale drug war, and call on the President to invest in more accurate data collection. The group are concerned that the government has used the estimates as the basis for national policies without providing sufficient opportunity for independent peer review.
“Obtaining valid estimates of drug use is not an easy, straight-forward process, yet we need to make sure that national policies are based on evidence that is thoroughly peer-reviewed and transparent. Each human life matters. Productive human lives may be compromised by misguided policies”, stated Prof. Dr. Irwanto.

People who use drugs face increasing stigma, discrimination and human rights violations as punitive drug control measures increasingly trump public health.

“HIV infections will continue to rise as long as drug users continue to live in fear of arrest or placement in involuntary rehabilitation,” said Dr. Kemal Siregar, Secretary General of the National AIDS Commission.

Signatories to the open letter argue in favour of establishing an independent, multi-sectoral committee on drug use comprising relevant government agencies, national ministries, researchers, service providers and community leaders tasked with reviewing available drug related data, setting priorities, recommending evidence-informed actions and monitoring progress.

“As people who use drugs, we have seen and experienced for ourselves that repressive and punitive approaches have exacerbated drug-related deaths and harms such as HIV and hepatitis C transmission,” adds Edo Agustian, National Coordinator of the Indonesian Drug Users Network. “We urge the government to work together with drug-using communities, academics and other stakeholders to build a more effective response before any more lives are lost.”

Signatories:

Prof. Dr. Irwanto, PhD, Researcher and Senior Observer, Atma Jaya HIV-AIDS Research Center;
Prof. Dr. Sulistyowati Irianto, University of Indonesia’s Faculty of Law;
Dr. Siti Musdah Mulia, Muslim scholar and Chairperson of the Indonesian Conference on Religion for Peace Professor;
Professor Dr. D.N. Wirawan, Head of the Public Health Postgraduate Program at Udayana University;
Dr Ignatius Praptoraharjo, Researcher at the Center for Health Policy and Management in the Faculty of Medicine at Gadjah Mada University;
Dr. Robert Robertus, Senior Lecturer in the Sociology Department at Negeri University Jakarta;
Edo Agustian, National Coordinator of the Indonesian Drug Users Network;
Haris Azhar, Coordinator of Kontras (Commission for “the Disappeared” and Victims of Violence);
Dr A Setyo Wibowo, Lecturer and Head of Philosophy at Driyarkara Philosophy Institute;
Rafendi Djamin, Indonesian Representative to the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission along with other signatories.
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Evidence-informed response to illicit drugs in Indonesia

To address the serious harm caused by drugs to individuals and the community is an important public health priority and one that all countries, including Indonesia, must tackle.

The Indonesian Government, led by President Joko Widodo, has heralded its commitment to evidence-based policy making. The public health community welcomes this commitment; however, as researchers, scientists, and practitioners, we have grave concerns that the government is missing an opportunity to implement an effective response to illicit drugs informed by evidence.

A close examination of the nature and extent of drug use in Indonesia reveals substantial gaps in knowledge and a scarcity of evidence to support forced rehabilitation and the punitive, law-enforcement-led approach favoured by the government.
Opioid overdose and infectious diseases, including HIV transmitted through unsafe injecting practices, are the primary causes of drug-related deaths worldwide.1 In the past 10 years, Indonesia has taken positive steps forward by introducing strategies such as opioid substitution therapy, needle and syringe programmes, and increased access to HIV treatment. Substantial evidence2 supports the effectiveness of these interventions in reducing fatal overdose and HIV transmission, morbidity, and mortality. However, these interventions have yet to be implemented to scale in Indonesia, and this delay is preventing the realisation of their potential benefit.

Meanwhile, there is evidence that criminalisation of people who use drugs and punitive law-enforcement approaches have failed to reduce the prevalence of drug use and are fuelling the HIV epidemic.3 Compulsory detention and rehabilitation of drug users has been shown to be ineffective in sustaining reductions in drug use.4

The Indonesian Government has frequently cited National Narcotics Board studies from 20085 and 2011,6 which estimate drug-use prevalence to be 2-6% in the general population (equivalent to 4-5 million people) and as many as 50 deaths per day from drug-related causes. We have serious concerns about the validity of these estimates for the following reasons: the details and methods of these studies are not publicly accessible; from information that is available, the recruitment methods appear to have been inappropriate, resulting in an unrepresentative sample and results that are not generalisable; differentiation between different types of drugs and frequency and patterns of their use were inadequate to identify problematic drug use; definitions of addiction were inconsistent with accepted criteria for drug dependence; and the unorthodox method used to indirectly estimate drug-related mortality is unreliable.

We call on the Indonesian Government to scale back punitive strategies that are ineffective and counterproductive and instead expand evidence-based interventions, such as opioid substitution therapy, needle and syringe programmes, HIV treatment, and care for people who use drugs; invest in the collection of better quality data on the scale and nature of drug use in Indonesia, without which an effective and appropriately targeted response cannot be developed; and form a national committee on drug use, comprising the National Narcotics Board, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Social Affairs, Ministry of Law and Human Rights, service providers, and community representatives, to review drug-related data, set priorities, recommend evidence-informed actions, and monitor progress. We support a transparent, peer-reviewed process for collecting data on drug-use indicators, and a commensurate evidence-based policy response.

We declare no competing interests.

*Irwanto, Dewa N Wirawan, Ignatius Praptoraharjo, Sulistyowati Irianto, Siti Musdah Mulia, on behalf of 11 signatories

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