

# Statement: Drug Users Remembrance Day

21<sup>st</sup> July 2015



## International Drug Users Remembrance Day, 2015

### The problem *is not* people who use drugs; the problem *is* the war on drugs

There are around 183,000 drug-related deaths a year.<sup>1</sup> Yet instead of the war on drugs being apportioned blame for the wanton damage it wreaks on so many lives, drugs and the people who use them continue to be scapegoated as the ‘problem’.

Less than a month ago, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC)’s *International Day against Drug Abuse and Illicit Trafficking* called for the world to “develop without drugs”.<sup>2</sup> The campaign called on people “to take a stand against a problem that affects us all”. The campaign’s aspiration to “develop without drugs” belied the fact that criminalisation and prohibition have failed to achieve their own misguided ambition: instead of reducing drug use, people who use drugs are catastrophically impacted by the so-called ‘war on drugs’, a war that has affected not only people who use drugs, but also the wider communities in which they live. **Drugs, and the people who use them, are not the ‘problem’. The problem, in fact, is the war on drugs and the systemic human rights violations that it drives.**

### The harms of ‘taking a stand against’ drugs: prohibition, criminalisation, and the war on drugs

‘Acting against drug use’, as the above UNODC campaign called for, drives considerable violence against people who use drugs and their communities. The war on drugs drives enormous rates of incarceration for ‘drug-related’ offences. It drives torture and execution of people for these offences. It drives internment and torture of people who use drugs in drug detention centres, ostensibly for ‘treatment’. It results in the black-market production of impure drugs that contain toxic contaminants, and increases risks of morbidity and mortality amongst people who use drugs. Opposition to drug use *per se* has informed opposition to harm reduction programmes the world over. Opposition to harm reduction has resulted in the vast majority of people who use drugs being unable to access harm reduction services, such as needle and syringe programmes, opiate substitution therapy, drug purity and contents testing, and drug consumption rooms. As a result of a lack of access to harm reduction services, the transmission of blood-borne viruses, and overdose-related mortality, remain devastatingly (and unnecessarily) high: it is estimated that almost 18% of people who inject drugs are living with HIV (2.8 million), and between 45.2% and 55.3% are estimated to be living with hepatitis C.

### A day to remember and honour those who have died

*International Drug Users Remembrance Day* is a day to honour friends, loved ones, colleagues, and comrades, the people who have been driven to an early death as a result of the relentless, utterly unjustifiable, war on drugs. We stress, and stress again, that this war is, in reality, a war on people who use drugs.

Today, we revisit the messages of INPUD’s *Drug User Peace Initiative*,<sup>3</sup> the images from which we have used in our posters for *International Drug Users Remembrance Day*: as long as prohibition, criminalisation, and the war on drugs continue, people who use drugs – as well as their families and communities – will continue to suffer considerable harm, and will continue to unnecessarily die. Quite simply, **the war on drugs is entirely incompatible with the promotion of human rights, health, safety, and wellbeing.**

<sup>1</sup> UNODC, 2014, *World Drug Report* (Vienna: UNODC)

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.unodc.org/drugs/en/about-the-world-drug-campaign/index.html>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.druguserpeaceinitiative.org/>