PARTNERING WITH POLICE TO IMPROVE THE LIVES OF PEOPLE WHO USE DRUGS
VIETNAM
In Vietnam, the Centre for Supporting Community Development Initiatives (SCDI) is working closely with the police on a pilot scheme that is improving the health and lives of people who use drugs while also enabling the police to reach public security goals.

“We have been working with the police in different ways for around five years now”, says Khuất Thị Hải Oanh, Executive Director at SCDI, a partner in the Partnership to Inspire, Transform and Connect the HIV response (PITCH).

The consequence of detention

Although drug use in Vietnam is classified as an administrative violation rather than a criminal offence, people who use drugs still face detention in the form of compulsory ‘rehabilitation’ for up to two years.

Rehabilitation centres are ineffective at reducing problematic drug use. Worse, they have been criticised for human rights violations, including indefinite detention, physical abuse and torture. Denial or inadequate provision of medical care, including evidence-based addiction treatment, is also common, despite the high prevalence of substance use disorders among detainees. As a result, people who use drugs generally suffer poor physical and mental health while detained and find their employment or study prospects are limited once they are released.

This increases the likelihood they will go back to problematic drug use and face other hardships.

Due to the intense police scrutiny they are under, people who use drugs are also more likely to be arrested for petty crimes than other people. This discriminatory approach has trapped many people who use drugs in a damaging cycle of arrest and detention.

In turn, by working more closely with the police, the rights violations people who use drugs experience at the hands of the police reduces.

“When a police officer come into closer interaction with someone who uses drugs they will see them with different eyes, they will see them as a person and be more emphatic to them,” says Oanh.

“We do this to increase understanding on both sides. Part of this work is providing police with information so they can see there are alternatives to punishment and they can be part of this solution. This can really empower them.” Khuất Thị Hải Oanh

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Practical solutions

SCDI is campaigning for people who use drugs to access voluntary, community-based, person-centred harm reduction services rather than compulsory rehabilitation. As UNAIDS reports, countries that have successfully scaled up harm reduction have experienced steep declines in HIV infections among people who inject drugs.

With support from PITCH and others, they have been generating practical evidence to show the positive impact this kind of community-based treatment can have, both for people who use drugs and wider society.

“When it comes to drug use the police’s biggest concern is public security,” says Oanh. “We have to acknowledge the truth that a significant proportion of people who are convicted of petty crimes are people who use drugs, which is due to the hardships they experience.”

SCDI is helping to facilitate a three-year pilot in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City whereby police officers refer people who use drugs for an assessment, which examines their health, legal and socio-economic needs, rather than sending them to compulsory rehabilitation.

This assessment provides entry to a range of services, including methadone treatment, HIV testing and treatment, vocational training, legal aid, peer support, mental health services, and hepatitis and tuberculosis screening. By 2020, the final year of the initiative, around 200 police officers were participating, and more than 600 people who use drugs had been diverted from detainment. Convictions among participants are now rare and many have been able to reconnect with the wider community.

Hanoi has expanded the pilot to another district and three other provinces and cities are in the process of adopting the scheme.

“By engaging the police on this pilot we have been able to bring the police officer closer to people who use drugs”

Oanh

“They are...witnessing the change in people’s lives. They are realising that, even if their only interest is public security, this is more effective than locking people up.”
A growing threat

The pilot’s success comes at a crucial time. A populist narrative to recriminalise drug use in Vietnam has resurfaced, spurred on by events in the Philippines, which has some of the strictest drug policies in South East Asia.

Oanh is hopeful the improving relationship between people who use drugs and state actors such as the police – and the evidence the pilot and other community-based schemes are generating – will help convince legislators to move the law towards public health and away from more punitive measures.

Compelling evidence exists to show that decriminalisation of personal drug use reduces the stigma and discrimination that prevents people who use drugs from accessing healthcare, including harm reduction, leaving them at higher risk of HIV and other health issues.

Advocacy to convince policy-makers to remove all sanctions for drug use is ongoing, but for this to happen two separate laws need to change. One of them, the Drug Control Law, is being reviewed by Vietnam’s National Assembly and is likely to be passed in 2021.

“Recriminalisation is a real issue,” says Oanh. “People look at what has been happening in the Philippines and it is creating some momentum for people who want to recriminalise. At first we thought we didn’t need to worry about this but the threat has become more real.”

Investing in community advocacy

Oanh says that being part of PITCH is helping community advocates make their voices heard in this debate.

“The global network that PITCH brings together – partners from different countries plus global partners – provides a kind of backup. Being part of a global movement for decriminalisation is very useful to support us in making the argument there can be no going back.

“Our closer working with the police in recent years shows this is possible.

We are almost at the tipping point but we are not quite there yet. My concern is that if we stop here we may lose what we have achieved. We need to continue until we get there.”

“But we are just at the beginning here, we need police collaboration to become the norm.”

Oanh

The Partnership to Inspire, Transform and Connect the HIV response (PITCH) strengthens community-based organisations’ capacity to uphold the rights of populations most affected by HIV by engaging in effective advocacy, generating robust evidence and developing meaningful policy solutions.

PITCH is a strategic partnership between Aidsfonds, Frontline AIDS and the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

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