



## **Police leadership in harm reduction and the HIV response**

*A Panel Discussion by UNODC, UNAIDS, IDLO at MENAHRRA Conference*

*Thursday 14 November 2013, 12:45 to 14:30*

*Sanawbar Hall, Hilton Beirut Metropolitan Palace*

### **Situational background:**

In most countries of the MENA region, the behaviors of people who are most affected by HIV, people who inject drugs, sex workers and MSM are criminalized by punitive laws. The punitive legal environment, along with harsh law enforcement, can shape negatively the behaviour and health outcomes of people who use drugs, sex workers, and other vulnerable groups. These laws are often used as justifications for neglect or violence towards key populations, reinforcing existing stigma against them and reducing their access to HIV services. In MENA, this combination of punitive laws and policies paired with high levels of stigma and discrimination in health care settings and the community, force the people most affected by HIV and/or living with HIV to remain hidden, further restricting their access to health care, including HIV treatment and harm reduction services.

With concentrated epidemics among key populations in Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and other countries of the MENA region, HIV prevention and harm reduction interventions are essential and should be further scaled up to curb the growing HIV epidemic. Law enforcement agencies (LEA) can constitute vital partners in the national HIV and harm reduction responses if they are engaged positively and systematically. The police force has important assets including discipline, hierarchy, efficiency and energy that can be positively exploited in dealing with HIV and drug use. At the same time, uniformed services are often perceived as role models in their society and this should be channelled towards HIV prevention efforts. They have an important role to play in facilitating the access of PWID to harm reduction and HIV services, and therefore in protecting their health and that of the entire community.

Globally and regionally there are successful examples of law enforcement assuming a key role in HIV prevention and care. In Kyrgyzstan in 2009, the government promulgated "Instruction 417," prohibiting police interference with harm reduction programs, re-enforcing citizen rights, addressing police occupational safety concerns, and institutionalizing police-public health collaboration<sup>1</sup>. There is now persuasive evidence on the topic that can be used for advocacy purposes, demonstrating how law enforcement, criminal justice, public health and civil society can effectively complement each other, share information and identify issues, offering a cost-effective way to reduce crime and mobilize strategically important resources and sectors for HIV prevention.

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<sup>1</sup> **Policy Reform to Shift the Health and Human Rights Environment for Vulnerable Groups: The Case of Kyrgyzstan's Instruction 417**, Health and Human Rights, Vol. 14, No. 2, pp. 1-15, December 2012

To be truly effective, law enforcement and health sectors should work in partnership to develop and support legislation, policy and practice that facilitate the common goals of HIV prevention through enhancing community safety and crime reduction.

**Objectives of the session:**

1. Highlight the potential and actual role of police as partners in the HIV and harm reduction response in the MENA region.
2. Demonstrate the importance and benefits of working with the police for building effective HIV responses on the ground, including strategic partnerships between the police and HIV programs
3. Increase understanding among HIV (and harm reduction) communities on how to effectively engage with the police in the MENA region

**Format of the session:**

Moderated panel discussion, with 6 panelists representing police, civil society organizations, key affected populations and UN agencies

*Moderator:*

- Ahmed Shehata, IDLO

*Panelists:*

- Lt. Col. Abdallah Elewi, Deputy Director, Anti-Narcotics Authority, Palestine
- Dr Abdelhakim Belamri, Representative of General Direction of National Security, Algeria
- Dr Nadya Mikdashi, Skoun NGO, Lebanon
- Representatives of people who inject drugs from Egypt (Freedom) and Morocco (Hasnouna)
- Karine Shalaby, UNODC

**Discussion topics:**

1. What is the role of the police in the HIV response? How have the police been engaged in the region and globally in the response to HIV?
2. How can HIV and harm reduction programs best engage with police, what are good examples of partnership building between HIV programs and the police?
3. What are the challenges in engaging with the police and how can we address them? What can we recommend in order to further build/strengthen police leadership in the HIV response in MENA?

**Date and time of session:**

Thursday 14 November 2013  
12:45 to 2:30 pm

**Venue:**

Sanawbar Hall, Lobby level, Hilton Beirut Metropolitan Palace