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650 words.

Thank you.

The Independent Panel on Pandemic Preparedness and Response stated in its report that the Covid 19 pandemic is a sign of how vulnerable and fragile our world is. Division and inequality between and within countries have been exacerbated, and the impact of the pandemic has been most severe on people who are already marginalized and disadvantaged.

As also a member of the Global Commission on Drug Policy, I would like to focus my remarks on challenges faced by people who use drugs in the context of Covid-19.

Let us first remember that, independently of the pandemic context, people who use drugs are faced on a daily basis with human rights abuses across the world, from death penalty to extrajudicial killings, coerced treatment, disproportionate sentencing, arbitrary and inappropriate incarceration denial of due process and care to those accused of drug crimes and abusive policing.

This is because the predominant approach of governments worldwide is to criminalize those who use/ possess drugs, with the false hope that, combined with efforts targeting the production and supply of drugs, the drug market and use can be eliminated.

The harms created through implementing punitive drug laws cannot be overstated when it comes to both their severity and scope.

The UN Secretary General and the Special Rapporteur on the Right to Health recognized people who use drugs as a vulnerable group in the pandemic context because of criminalization, stigma, discrimination, underlying health issues, social and economic vulnerability and limited access to life saving harm reduction programs.

Data indicate that more people have been using drugs during the pandemic because of the psychological toll of the pandemic and more people used drugs alone - a risk factor-. Closure of borders restricted access to some drugs, resulting in people sometimes using anything they can find, including various prescription drugs mixed with alcohol. In the US, more synthetic opioids like fentanyl came in supply, “adding more fuel to the fire “and resulting in last year representing the highest death toll from overdose ever recorded in the country.

And yet, the evidence shows that in most countries, even in times of lockdown, arrests for presumed drug offenses and inflexible law enforcement continued to take place.

At the same time, a number of innovations in the provision of services have led to facilitated access to services for people who use drugs under Covid 19 restriction measures. The crisis situation, lockdowns and curfews prompted medical centers and non-governmental organizations to partner in the daily provision of preventive materials, therapy for dependence, antiretroviral medicines and food supplies to clients, particularly in remote areas.

Innovative initiatives include the provision of take-home Opioid Agonist Therapy medications for periods of one to several weeks, mobile outpatient clinics to deliver OAT; NGOs delivering sterile needles and syringes, masks, hygiene materials, naloxone, Covid 19 and HIV self-tests, using their own cars or through use of couriers; and on-line counseling for clients.

Prison settings have amplified Covid-19, just as they amplify TB because of poor airborne infection control and overcrowding. The high incidence of Covid 19 among incarcerated people has led governments and prison administrations to take exceptional measures to decongest prisons. Since the start of the pandemic, over a million prisoners have been released in Europe, Asia, Africa, North America under different release schemes and based on legislative changes under the circumstances or executive decrees.

The Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights has issued a statement together with WHO and UNODC calling on governments to release prisoners at “high risk for covid-19 2 and those who could be released without compromising public safety”.

Since this seminar aims at an exchange of good practices, one can only advocate for these initiatives taken in exceptional circumstances to remain, to lead to relevant policy reforms at country level beyond crisis times or as a minimum to have our societies reflect on whether criminalization, sentencing and incarceration for non-violent drug offences makes any sense.