

Time for Harm Reduction Legislation

By: Wachira Charity



While harm reduction is a fairly old concept, it's often been marred with a lot of skepticism and questions of intent especially among people who use drugs sometimes seen as fueling the use of drugs. The effect of this is even greater in the African context where drug use is still perceived as a problem of westernization among many folks.

While the truth to this is highly contested, harm reduction interventions among high risk groups including drug users remain the bridging gap between life and death. It is also imperative to understand that to realize an HIV free population; no one can be left behind, for every new infection is a new bridge erected.

The risk of HIV and blood borne infections transmission among drug users, and more particularly among people who inject drugs remains rife, however most countries in the Eastern African context still lack data to inform programming and service delivery to these special needs group, operates in a highly punitive criminal justice system that has often led the drug users to stay 'hidden'.

Despite the great and progressive efforts to create and foster harm reduction services in the region through creation of a responsive harm reduction movement for

the region, through projects like the Regional HIV and Harm Reduction project, a lot still needs to be done. The Project spanning eight countries is pushing for policy change, research and community systems strengthening to amplify the voices of drug users, however sustainability of the gains made unless they are safeguarded through policy legislation remain at stake.

East Africa is home to about 150 million people, 260,000 among them being people who use drugs. This constitutes about a fifth of the population of drug users in Africa and growing, thus cannot be ignored. This is majorly because of the role of the Eastern Africa region as a transit route as well as the growing use of drugs for recreation.

Consequently this has fueled the growth of the HIV epidemic standing at about 18%, arising from the sharing of injecting equipment and related sexual behavior, with recent data from studies conducted in Tanzania and Kenya indicating that most of the people who inject drugs acquire HIV before the age of 25. And while this statistics are worrying, its even more alarming to see leading countries in harm reduction like Tanzania closing shop and criminalizing organizations offering services to key populations.

The question therefore becomes ,which way for harm reduction?

Harm reduction entails addressing the health, social and economic consequences faced by people who use drugs. On one hand the region is starting to respond to the drug use problem, and considering other approaches apart from the traditional demand reduction strategies with an emphasis on incarceration, to more public health oriented harm reduction approaches. There is also development of a policy on harm reduction spearheaded by the East African Community Secretariat and regional Harm Reduction partners. The draft policy seeks to address 5 broad key policy areas:

Data collection to inform Harm Reduction, Developing national harm reduction policies, Delivering interventions to people who use drugs, strengthening the capacity of PWUDs across EAC as well as creation of a supportive legal environment.

While this is a great step in the right direction and holds great promise for harm reduction legislation,, the responsibility to ensure the policy sees the light of day is the push and advocacy of member countries to their representatives to ensure that they support its legislation as well as auctioning it.

Although the policy is not an end in itself it will provide a platform for sensitization, advocacy and access to services, reaffirming the health and human rights of the people who use drugs. The member countries stakeholders would still need to sensitize to promote its understanding for effective application to bridge the service gap for people who use drugs in the region.

Despite the road ahead that must be walked to cement harm reduction in the region, the future looks bright and promising.