Criminalizing Poverty: How Current Drug Policies Harm Poor Communities

Adrianna Satorski
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Harm Reduction is an approach to drug use aimed at decreasing the negative impacts of use:
- Accepts that drug use is a part of our society and chooses to minimize harms rather than disregard or condemn them.
- Recognizes that the realities of poverty, class, racism, and other social inequalities affect both people’s vulnerability to and capacity for effectively dealing with drug-related harm.
- Does not aim to minimize or ignore the actual danger associated with drug use.

**CURRENT DRUG POLICY PERPETUATES POVERTY AROUND THE WORLD**

**Brazil**
- As one of the most unequal countries in the world, marginalized Brazilians often see no other choice but to engage in drug trade activities. In the context of severe unemployment and underemployment, some people turn to the drugs trade to meet basic needs.

**India**
- Permits and regulates cultivation of opium with proper license, but illicit cultivation remains widespread as it is a significant source of livelihood for poor and marginalized communities. Illegal opium fields are destroyed and illegal cultivation or possession results in severe fines and lengthy imprisonment, continuing the cycle of poverty within communities.

**United States**
- Repeat offenses, even for simple possession, can result in incarceration for life. For individuals diagnosed with Substance Use Disorders, this can lead to difficulty finding stable employment, only fueling the addiction. Despite some alternatives to incarceration for possession (i.e. drug courts), incompliance with these alternatives leads to immediate incarceration.

**Steps to end the damage of the ‘war on drugs’**

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<th>For governments</th>
<th>For the development sector</th>
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<td><strong>STEP 1</strong></td>
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<td>Decriminalise low-level engagement and end crop eradication</td>
<td>Advocate for moves away from prohibition towards alternatives such as legal regulation</td>
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<td><strong>STEP 2</strong></td>
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<td>Consult affected communities on their needs</td>
<td>Ensure reforms are pro-poor and bolster rather than undermine the health of marginalised communities</td>
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<td><strong>STEP 3</strong></td>
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<td>Increase state support for poverty reduction and public services</td>
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**GOAL:** Legal, regulated drugs markets that support public health

**Ideally...**

**Decriminalization** removes or lessens criminal punishment for drug use AND small-scale distribution, though civil penalties remain.

**Legalization** fully removes laws that ban the use of some (or most) drugs, and creates a legal, regulated market for these drugs.

**Harm Reduction & Poverty**
- HR helps to empower individuals living in poverty by not criminalizing their drug use or addiction, but rather providing them with proper resources and services to effectively assist them with their addiction.
- Drug users have a better chance of employment prospects after treatment due to not having a criminal record.

**Marginalization and poverty**
- Uses or abuses illicit drugs
- Arrested for possession or intoxication
- Prison
- Stigma and criminal record
- Restricted job prospects

**Drug trade provides livelihood**
- Cycle of Drug Dealing and Poverty

**Decriminalization/ Legalization & Poverty**
- Decriminalization and legalization can help reduce stigmatization of poor individuals for their drug use or small-scale distribution, while shifting monetary resources from law enforcement to better prevention and treatment programs for drug use.
- With less funding for law enforcement, more funding can be placed into poverty prevention and reduction efforts.
- Both approaches can result in better employment prospects for drug users and small-scale distributors, such as jobs within the legal drug industry.