The criminalisation of illicit drug users is fuelling the HIV epidemic and has resulted in overwhelmingly negative health and social consequences. A full reorientation is needed.

I n response to the health and social harms of illegal drugs, a large international drug prohibition regime has been developed under the umbrella of the United Nations.1 Decades of research provide a comprehensive assessment of the impacts of the global “War on Drugs” and, in the wake of the XVIII International AIDS Conference in Vienna, Austria, the international scientific community calls for an acknowledgement of the limits and harms of drug prohibition, and for drug policy reform to remove barriers to effective HIV prevention, treatment and care.

The evidence that law enforcement has failed to prevent the availability of illegal drugs, in communities where there is demand, is now unambiguous.2,3 Over the last several decades, national and international drug surveillance systems have demonstrated a general pattern of falling drug prices and increasing drug purity—despite massive investments in drug law enforcement.4,5

Furthermore, there is no evidence that increasing the ferocity of law enforcement meaningfully reduces the prevalence of drug use.6 The data also clearly demonstrate that the number of countries in which people inject illegal drugs is growing, with women and children becoming increasingly affected.6 Outside of sub-Saharan Africa, injection drug use accounts for approximately one in nine African-American males in the age group 20 to 34 is incarcerated on any given day, primarily as a result of drug law enforcement.

Stigma towards people who use illicit drugs, which reorients the political prioritisation of criminalising drug users and undermines HIV prevention and other health promotion efforts.20,21

Severe human rights violations, including torture, forced labour, inhumane and degrading treatment, and execution of drug offenders in a number of countries.22,23

A massive illicit market worth an estimated annual value of US$320 billion.4 These profits remain entirely outside the control of government. They fuel crime, violence and corruption in countless urban communities and have destabilised entire countries, such as Colombia, Mexico and Afghanistan.9

Billions of tax dollars wasted on a “War on Drugs” approach to drug control that does not achieve its stated objectives and, instead, directly or indirectly contributes to the above harms.24

Unfortunately, evidence of the failure of drug prohibition to achieve its stated goals, as well as the severe negative consequences of these policies, is often denied by those with vested interests in maintaining the status quo.25 This has created confusion among the public and has cost countless lives. Governments and international organisations have ethical and legal obligations to respond to this crisis and must seek to enact alternative evidence-based strategies that can effectively reduce the harms of drugs without creating harms of their own. We therefore call on governments and international organisations, including the United Nations, to:

- Undertake a transparent review of the effectiveness of current drug policies.
- Implement and evaluate the evidence-based public health approach to address the individual and community harms stemming from illicit drug use.
- Decriminalise drug users, scale up evidence-based drug treatment options and abolish inef- fective compulsory drug treatment centres that violate the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.26
- Unequivocally endorse and scale up funding for the implementation of the comprehensive package of HIV interventions spelled out in the WHO, UNODC and UNAIDS Target Setting Guide.27
- Meaningfully involve members of the affected community in developing, monitoring and implementing services and policies that affect their lives.

Basing drug policies on scientific evidence will not eliminate drug use or the problems stemming from drug injection. However, reorienting drug policies towards evidence-based approaches that respect, protect and fulfil human rights has the potential to reduce harms deriving from current policies and would allow for the redirection of the vast financial resources towards where they are needed most: implementing and evaluating evidence-based prevention, regulatory, treatment and harm reduction interventions.