The Vienna Declaration
Leading the way to illicit drug policies based on evidence, not ideology
As things now stand, governments across the world continue to incarcerate drug users, and the cycle of stigma, HIV infection, and mass inequity goes on. The end result is a global HIV epidemic among drug users that is spiraling out of control.

Stephen Lewis
Former UN Special Envoy for HIV/AIDS in Africa
What is the Vienna Declaration?

The Vienna Declaration is a scientific statement that seeks to improve community health and safety by calling for evidence-based drug policies. It was drafted by a writing committee of international experts in the fields of HIV/AIDS and drug policy, under the leadership of the International AIDS Society, the British Columbia Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS, and the International Centre for Science in Drug Policy.

The Vienna Declaration was adopted as the Official Declaration of the XVIII International AIDS Conference, held in Vienna from July 18 to 23, 2010. This is the largest biennial public health conference in the world, attracting about 20,000 delegates internationally. The 2010 conference was convened by the International AIDS Society along with various international conference partners, including the World Health Organization (WHO), the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and the European Commission.
Why Do We Need the Vienna Declaration?

We are currently at a critical juncture in drug policy.

Research shows that the criminalization of illicit drug users continues to fuel a massive, global HIV epidemic and has resulted in overwhelmingly negative health and social consequences. Outside of sub-Saharan Africa, 1 in 3 new HIV cases occurs in intravenous drug users, and in some areas of Eastern Europe, HIV prevalence may be as high as 70% among people who inject drugs. Drug-related crime, violence and corruption have destabilized entire countries such as Mexico, Columbia and Afghanistan. Since 2006, in Mexico alone, nearly 29,000 people have been killed in drug-related violence in the past four years. The Vienna Declaration was adopted as the Official Declaration of the XVIII International AIDS Conference, held in Vienna from July 18 to 23, 2010. This is the largest biennial public health conference in the world, attracting about 20,000 delegates internationally. The 2010 conference was convened by the International AIDS Society along with various international conference partners, including the World Health Organization (WHO), the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and the European Commission.

The human and economic costs of the status quo can no longer be tolerated.

Governments and taxpayers are increasingly bearing the financial burden of failed drug policies that emphasize incarceration over health-based approaches. In the United States, about $2.5 trillion has been spent on drug control efforts since the start of the “War on Drugs” in the 1960s. Currently, one out of every 100 Americans is behind bars on a drug-related criminal conviction. Despite the best efforts of the “War on Drugs,” international surveillance systems have shown that drug purity has increased, drug prices have decreased, and drug use has remained largely unchanged since the 1980s. The “War on Drugs” approach also diverts law enforcement attention away from areas where it could meaningfully improve community safety. The Vienna Declaration highlights the failure of current drug policies and calls for the development of new policies based on scientific evidence.
The criminalisation of illicit drug users is fuelling the HIV epidemic and has resulted in overwhelmingly negative health and social consequences. A full policy reorientation is needed.

In response to the health and social harms of illegal drugs, a large international drug prohibition regime has been developed under the auspices 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 and basis 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 make 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.4,5,6

Furthermore, there is no evidence that increasing the ferocity of law enforcement meaningfully reduces the prevalence of drug use.7 The data also clearly demonstrate that the astonishing levels of crime in which people inject illegal drugs is growing, with women and children becoming increasingly affected.6,8 Outside of sub-Saharan Africa, injection drug use accounts for approximately one in three new cases of HIV.9 In many areas where HIV is spreading most rapidly, such as Eastern Europe and Central Asia, transmission (e.g., HIV, hepatitis C & B, and tuberculosis) and other harms is increased.10,11

A crisis in criminal justice systems as a result of drug law enforcement drives drug users away from prevention and care services and into environments where the risk of infectious disease transmission (e.g., HIV, hepatitis C & B, and tuberculosis) and other harms is increased.12,13

• Consequences include but are not limited to:
  - HIV outbreaks among incarcerated and institutionalised drug users as a result of punitive laws and policies and a lack of HIV prevention services in these settings.11–13
  - The undermining of public health systems when law enforcement drives drug users away from prevention and care services and into environments where the risk of infectious disease transmission (e.g., HIV, hepatitis C & B, and tuberculosis) and other harms is increased.12,13
  - A crisis in criminal justice systems as a result of drug law enforcement.14

Severe human rights violations, including torture, forced labour, inhuman and degrading treatment, and execution of drug offenders in a number of countries.2,15

A massive illicit market worth an estimated annual value of US$320 billion.6 These profits remain entirely outside the control of government. They fuel crime, violence and corruption in countless urban and rural communities and have destabilised entire countries, such as Colombia, Mexico and Afghanistan.16

• 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.17

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.18 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 our own. We, the undersigned, 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 a science-based public health approach to address the individual and community harms stemming from illicit drug use.

References

2. Statement by the UN Commission on Narcotic Drugs: Drug users and drug policy (UN Doc. A/54/28, 2000).
10. Schaubel JD, Falco J, Drucker E. The evidence for the medical effects of drug prohibition. Unpublished manuscript (available from the authors).
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Writing Committee

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Endorsements

During the first two months following its launch, more than 17,000 individuals and more than 400 organizations from every region of the globe endorsed the Vienna Declaration. Among the signatories to date are seven Nobel laureates, thousands of scientific and academic experts, a diversity of health, faith-based, and civil society organizations, law enforcement leaders, and the judiciary from countries around the world.

Key individual endorsements include:
- Prof. Françoise Barre-Sinoussi, Nobel laureate, co-discoverer of HIV in 2008
- Paulo Coelho, author
- Sir Ian Gilmore, Past President of the Royal College of Physicians of London
- Anand Grover, UN Special Rapporteur
- Michel D. Kazatchkine, Executive Director of The Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria
- Sir Harold Kroto and Robert F. Curl, Jr., Nobel laureates in Chemistry, 1999
- Stephen Lewis, former UN Special Envoy for HIV/AIDS in Africa, 2001-2006
- James Orbinski, Nobel laureate, who accepted as President of Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) in 1999
- Vernon L. Smith, Nobel laureate in Economics, 2002
- Norm Stamper, retired Seattle Police Chief
- Vernon L. Smith, Nobel laureate in Economics, 2002
- Jack W. Szostak, Nobel laureate in Physiology/Medicine, 2009
- Mario Vargas Llosa, author and Nobel laureate

“...The Vienna Declaration is an opportunity to show governments that we are speaking with a voice that spans continents, cultures and languages to send a simple message: We demand drug policies that respect human rights and are based on scientific evidence.”

Anya Sarang
President, Andrey Rylkov Foundation

Key organizational endorsements include:
- AIDES France
- AIDS Foundation East-West
- Andrey Rylkov Foundation for Health and Social Justice
- ANITEA
- Australian Federation of AIDS Organizations
- Austrian AIDS Society
- Beijing Aizhixing Institute
- Canadian Public Health Association
- Canadian Association of HIV Research
- Drug Policy Alliance
- Eurasian Harm Reduction Network
Political Support

Former Latin American Presidents
In addition to support from academics, civil society organizations and the general public, there is growing international political support for the Vienna Declaration. Three former Latin American Presidents—**Fernando Henrique Cardoso** (former President of Brazil), **Ernesto Zedillo** (former President of México) and **César Gaviria** (former President of Colombia)—have all formally endorsed the Vienna Declaration, urging alternatives to the “War on Drugs” given the devastation this war has caused in Latin America.

“Current drug policies are repressive and firmly rooted in prejudices, fears and ideology. The way forward is clear: to safeguard human rights, security and health, please join me in signing the Vienna Declaration.”

Fernando Henrique Cardoso
President of Brazil, 1995–2003

Leaders from the Country of Georgia
Three leaders from the country of Georgia—**First Lady Sandra Roelofs**, Minister of Labour, Health and Social Affairs **Irakli Giorgobiani**, and **Deputy Chairman of Parliament George Tsereteli**—have also demonstrated their support for evidence-based drug policy by signing the Vienna Declaration.
Media Coverage

The Vienna Declaration has received extensive media coverage. More than 200 articles have been written about the Declaration by media outlets around the world, including leading newspapers such as the New York Times, the Guardian, El Pais, the Globe and Mail, the LA Times, and the Wall Street Journal.

The impacts of drug prohibition are felt first-hand at the local level. The City of Toronto, Canada was the first municipality to formally endorse the Vienna Declaration. Victoria and Vancouver, Canada and the Mayor of Prague, Czech Republic have also endorsed the Declaration.

“In Toronto, we are committed to a balanced response to drug use that focuses tax resources on measures that can meaningfully improve community health and safety.”

David Miller
Mayor of Toronto, 2003–2010

“The Vienna Declaration is a powerful statement in support of an effective public health approach to illicit drug policy. We’re signing this declaration because we believe that drug addiction needs to be treated as a health issue, not a criminal issue.”

Gregor Robertson
Mayor of Vancouver

Portugal’s experience points to drug solution

IT WORKED: Political will needed but Tories going other way

End the war on drugs, say AIDS campaigns

“Scientists appeal for signatures to the Vienna Declaration to press for changes in drug policy and de-criminalisation of injectors, which they say will slow the spread of HIV!”

The Guardian
June 29, 2010
Clearly, the current policy approach has failed, and we must find a better way to deal with illicit drug use that improves community health and safety and minimizes health and social harms rather than creating them. To date, however, policy makers have been slow to move away from strict drug law enforcement policies. In Russia, 1 in 100 adults is now infected with HIV, largely because the country is focused on a futile war on drugs. Moving forward will require that politicians and other leaders consider these harms and boldly agree that drug policies should be based on evidence.

As laid out in the Vienna Declaration, there are public health models in many countries that demonstrate alternative policy approaches that can be highly effective in improving community health and safety. Therefore, in the coming years, the Declaration will continue to gather support for:

- Scaling up proven evidence-based prevention, treatment, and harm reduction strategies
- Further evaluation of the impacts of drug policies and research in the area of illicit drug policy
- Expanded knowledge related to illicit drug policy so that public policy can be fully informed by the best available evidence.

Next Steps

In my experience, drug addiction is not a path that people willingly choose. Those who suffer from addiction need and deserve access to services that can keep them and their loved ones safe and point them in the direction of recovery. Let’s stop this ideological war that cannot be won. Let’s instead adopt strategies that research has proven to be effective, that come without dire unintended consequences.”

Norm Stamper, PhD
Seattle Chief of Police (Ret.)

Drug war statement upstaged at AIDS gathering
“The one exception to the official American silence was Dr. Nora D. Volkow, the normally low-profile director of the National Institute on Drug Abuse, who said she personally agreed with the declaration’s premise.”

New York Times
July 23, 2010

A failed “War on Drugs” prompts rethinking on HIV infections among injection-drug users
“Drug policy has focused on a policing approach of prohibition and incarceration, which has contributed to spreading HIV within the injection-drug community. Comprehensive drug reform policies are showing better results.”

Scientific American
August 25, 2010

Drug law enforcement has entirely failed
“Aids experts from around the world are calling for governments to adapt their law enforcement policies to help prevent the spread of HIV among drug users. Dr Evan Wood, founder of the International Centre for Science in Drug Policy, explains why he is calling for a ‘dramatic reform of drug policy’.”

BBC
July 19, 2010

Toronto formally endorses harm reduction on drug use
“Toronto has become the first city in the world—and the first government in North America—to formally endorse a declaration that advocates harm reduction over the war on drugs.”

Globe and Mail,
August 26, 2010
Building Towards AIDS 2012

With strong support for the Declaration in only the first months after its launch, momentum is already building towards the next International AIDS Conference, which will be held in Washington, DC in July 2012. In advance of this, endorsements are being sought so that a strong message will be sent to the international community that drug policy must be based on science and evidence—not ideology.

Here is what you can do to support the Vienna Declaration in the lead-up to the AIDS 2012 Conference:

1. **Sign the Declaration**
   Everyone who supports evidence-based drug policies is encouraged to sign the Declaration. Anyone who represents an organization and is entitled to do so is encouraged to obtain the endorsement of the group and to sign the Declaration on its behalf.

2. **Encourage others to sign the Declaration**
   Everyone is asked to spread the word to others about why and how they can support evidence-based drug policies. Urge your friends, colleagues and others to sign the Declaration.

3. **Ask your local government representatives to endorse the Declaration**
   If you are a concerned citizen and want your elected representatives to know that you support the call for evidence-based drug policies, encourage them to formally endorse the Vienna Declaration. If you are interested in asking your local government to support the Vienna Declaration, please let us know at info@icsdp.org.

4. **If you are an elected official, bring the Vienna Declaration to your government for endorsement**
   With political support for the Declaration gaining momentum, it is critical that elected officials continue to take a leadership role and demonstrate their support for scientifically grounded, evidence-based drug policies by passing a motion or resolution officially endorsing the Declaration. If you are an elected official or policy maker interested in bringing the Vienna Declaration forward to your local or state government, please contact us at info@icsdp.org for assistance or more information.

www.viennadeclaration.com
References


