



## CALLING FOR CONCERTED ACTION FOR A COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH IN RESPONDING TO HIV/AIDS AMONG PEOPLE WHO USE DRUG

Kuala Lumpur, 9<sup>th</sup> December 2010 – Options for the Management of Drug Using Offenders Seminar is an effort by the Malaysian AIDS Council (MAC) and the International Drug Policy Consortium (IDPC), supported by the Open Society Institute (OSI), bringing together leading academics, experts and professionals in the field of drug use and HIV/AIDS interventions, to reduce harm resulting from the spread of HIV among people who inject drugs.

The President of the Malaysian AIDS Council, Datuk Mohd Zaman Khan says “We certainly could do more. Only a handful of people who use drugs in our nation are being reached, and far too many are imprisoned for minor offences, detained without trial and have no or little access to treatment, care and support. To change this situation will take commitment, advocacy, and political courage. Failure to do so will exacerbate the spread of HIV infection, undermine treatment programmes, and continue to expand prison populations with patients in need of care. Concerted action by governments, policy makers, law enforcers, organisations, health systems and individuals could lead to enormous benefits for families, communities, and our nation.”

Some 70% of the identified HIV cases in Malaysia are among injecting drug users. Currently, an estimated of 170, 000 Malaysians are believed to inject drugs.

In Malaysia, the response to illicit drug use has been largely punitive, with the goal of the Malaysian government to achieve a drug free society by 2015. Despite that, there has been a substantial rise in the number of drug users in the country. Policies of detention, forced treatment, and incarceration of people who use drugs have been largely unsuccessful. The response to HIV/AIDS, however, in terms of research, scale-up of prevention, human rights of those affected, and access to antiretroviral treatment, is showing some remarkable success.

In 2005, Harm Reduction initiatives were introduced in Malaysia, allowing the operation of Methadone Maintenance Therapy (MMT) and the establishing Needle and Syringe Exchange Programme (NSEP) to curb the spread of HIV among people who inject drugs. Since then, these efforts have shown positive results, reducing HIV infection among injecting drug users by nearly 60% from 2005 to 2009.

Nonetheless, people who use drugs too often face stigma and discrimination in HIV prevention, treatment and care. Society considers such users less deserving of compassion than others, because drug users’ health problems are supposed self-inflicted or their substance use is judged as a moral or personal failing. Even among health-care providers, many preconceptions prevail about people who use drugs and are infected with HIV.

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