JUST SAY NO
TO THE WAR ON DRUGS

FOR THE RIGHTS
AND HEALTH OF PEOPLE
WHO USE DRUGS
Coalition PLUS’ actions

Since their inception, our community-based organisations have been helping people who use psychoactive substances to access care and prevention methods. Over the years, they have used an evidence-based harm-reduction approach, including through the distribution of clean injecting equipment. But beyond essential public health actions, they also contribute, at national and international level, in the drug policy reform movement, they promote the fundamental rights of people who use drugs, they fight stigmatisation and discrimination, and they participate in putting an end to repression, this tradition which is still common practice in terms of drug policy in most countries at global level.

Harm reduction: pioneering organisations

Launched in 2008, Coalition PLUS relies on the historical expertise of its member organisations to promote pragmatic and evidence-based measures, respectful of people, and respective of their rights. With a perspective of “doing with” rather than “doing for”, our organisations value user experiences and peer-to-peer exchanges, in order for harm reduction messages and strategies to be tailored to their practices and real-life contexts.

Thus, in 1985, AIDES, French member of Coalition PLUS, initiated experimental needle and syringe programs, whose importance and relevance will only be officially recognised ten years later 1. In 2006, AIDES was also actively involved in the creation of drop-in centres for people who use drugs. These centres, commonly known as CAARUD in France, offers a welcoming place and harm reduction counselling, with an innovative medical and social approach, and has been an opportunity of boosting harm reduction policy in France by involving people who use drugs in their daily operations. Today, AIDES manages 25% of these CAARUD and remains committed to innovative research programs around harm reduction, like the care, support and counselling arounds risks related to injection practices, service known as Aerli2.

Our Portuguese member organisation, GAT, founded in 2001, also benefits from the experience of a veteran activist in this field. Luís Mendão, GAT chairperson, has been pushing for drug policy reform since 1984; he actively participated in the advocacy efforts to decriminalise the use of all drugs in Portugal, which paid off in 2001. Since then, Portugal has witnessed an amazing drop in new HIV infections among people who inject drugs: in 2013, they accounted for 7% of new HIV cases (compared with 52% in 2000)3. In 2012, GAT opened IN-Mouraria in Lisbon, a harm reduction centre close to people who use drugs, both in terms of needs and proximity. This centre offers both the usual harm reduction services (distribution of injecting equipment, screening, psychosocial support) and is distinguished by the ability of peer educators, who have themselves used the services of the centre, to re-create the social link with the people visiting the centre. Through this approach and proximity, marginalised people who use drugs see their dignity restored, and have the tools required to take control of their life and play an active role in their health follow-up. Also in Switzerland, our member, the AIDS Group Geneva, played a pioneering harm reduction role, with needle and syringe programmes as early as 1989. In 2001, the organisation created the Quai 9 in Geneva, one of the first supervised drug injection centres in a major European city, which has been administered since 2004 by the Geneva organisation Première Ligne. Nearly 20 years later, supervised drug injection centres have shown to be effective in bringing people who inject drugs and who are at high risk of HIV and hepatitis C infection into health care settings, reducing the number of fatal overdoses, and significantly reducing safety issues related to drug use. Today, around 10 countries provide this service, among which the Netherlands, Germany, Spain, Australia, Canada, Norway, Luxembourg and Denmark.

Advocacy: Dealing with the lack of funding and the war on drugs

In Romania, our member organisation ARAS is one of the only CSO offering specific support to people who use drugs, and implementing needle and syringe programmes, as well as methadone prescription since 1999. ARAS also has two ambulances providing harm reduction services to the most vulnerable groups: sex workers, people who use drugs, homeless people and Roma. Running both during night and day, its mobile screening, condom distribution and needle and syringe programs can effectively reach out to particularly vulnerable populations. Following the discontinuation of Global Fund grants in 2011, the lack of funding for harm reduction led to a real health crisis among people who use drugs in Romania: they represented in 2012-2013 nearly one-third of new HIV cases, compared to 16% in 20164. ARAS activists and their allies have therefore organised public demonstrations to challenge...
the authorities to put an end to this devastating situation. Since then, Bucharest City Council has agreed to fund a HIV and HCV prevention project for vulnerable populations. However, these efforts are still insufficient, and the Romanian Ministry of Health still refuses to fund HIV prevention activities implemented by NGOs.

In the Republic of Mauritius, where people who inject drugs are the most impacted by the HIV and hepatitis C epidemics, PILS, our member, has been at the forefront, advocating for the implementation of harm reduction programs, which have been implemented since 2006. These measures have undoubtedly contributed to the drastic decrease of new infections among people who inject drugs: while they accounted for 52% of new HIV cases in 2005, this figure had dropped to 31% in 2014. In Mauritius, just over half of the people who inject drugs live with HIV and 96% of them live with HCV. Unfortunately, since an overtly anti-drug government came to power, new HIV infections among people who use psychoactive substances have been on the rise again.

In addition, in a region where borders remain highly porous regarding trafficking and organized crime, advocacy efforts for drug policy reform cannot be confined to the national level. Thus, our member in Burkina Faso, REVS PLUS, leads an active advocacy at regional and international level. For example, with the support of AIDES, REVS PLUS participated in international high-level meetings on drugs, both within the framework of the United Nations General Assembly on Drugs (UNGASS), in New York in 2016, or in the context of the Commission on Narcotic Drugs (CND). In Vienna, REVS PLUS was also identified last February as the focal point for the ECOWAS/UNODC implementation of a regional plan for the drugs response, and is currently involved in the development of a model law governing drug use, under the aegis of IDPC and in partnership with the West African Commission on Drugs (WACD).

**North Africa: promoting the exchange of experiences at regional level**

As a member of Coalition PLUS, ALCS has been pioneering harm reduction and drug policy advocacy in Morocco. Thus, in 1996, it carried out the first Moroccan survey among people who use drugs in Tangier and Tetouan. With other partners, ALCS initiated harm reduction programs, way before the integration of these strategies in national HIV/AIDS public policies. Thus, in 2009, thanks to the funds collected during the Moroccan Sidaction, ALCS launched the first needle and syringe program in Tetouan.

ALCS was able to share this experience within Coalition PLUS’ Middle East / North Africa (MENA) Platform, set up with the support of AIDES and which ALCS coordinates. Thus, a workshop on the role of civil society in harm reduction among people who use drugs was organised in September 2016 in Algiers. This event contributed in building the foundations for advocacy around improving, strengthening and upscaling harm reduction services delivery, but also mobilising and bringing together many civil society and institutional actors (including the United Nations and the Global Fund).

**Outlook**

In preparation for the next UN high-level meeting, scheduled for March 2019, around the coming CND, Coalition PLUS and its members are ready to bring the voices of those concerned to international forums. In this context, we are launching our “Just say no to the war on drugs” mobilisation campaign, which ironically diverts the campaign initiated by Nancy Reagan “Just say no to drugs”.

Want to know more ? Our activists welcome you all on our stand: Coalition PLUS – Stand 210
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5 Ministry of Health and Quality of Life, Republic of Mauritius, 2015
6 51.6%, according to a behavioral and biological study of 2011
JUST SAY YES
TO DRUG USERS’ RIGHTS
TO DECRIMINALIZATION
TO HARM REDUCTION EVERYWHERE
TO NEEDLE EXCHANGE PROGRAMS
TO OPIOID SUBSTITUTION TREATMENT
TO DRUG CONSUMPTION ROOMS

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