

ICPS newsletter[®]

The spread of HIV/AIDS in Ukraine requires current government policy to be reviewed

The spread of HIV/AIDS in Ukraine is becoming a national epidemic that will be a major factor hampering the country's development in this decade. According to experts, current government policy on fighting injection drug use, the main vehicle for spreading HIV, is ineffective, contradictory and seriously hampered by totalitarian attitudes. ICPS and the All-Ukrainian Harm Reduction Association have prepared a Green Paper to be discussed by stakeholders. The Paper analyzes the roots of current problems and proposes three policy options in response to this looming threat

The spread of HIV jeopardizes the country's development

According to expert forecasts, by 2010, the number of HIV-positive individuals in Ukraine could grow to nearly 1.5 million people, 10% of whom will die of AIDS. The vast majority of them will be under 40. Assuming that the effectiveness of government policy does not change, by 2010, the treatment of HIV/AIDS alone will take the same amount of money that is now being spent on the entire healthcare system. Pressure on the social system will escalate due to the growing number of orphans who have lost one or both parents to AIDS. The most pessimistic calculations have the number of such children at 77,000 by 2010. Clearly, the spread of HIV/AIDS and related diseases is a direct threat to Ukraine's economic development, as most HIV-infected are individuals aged 20–39, that is, people in the prime of their lives in terms of physical, creative and intellectual capacities.

Injecting drugs fosters the spread of AIDS

Since 1994–1995, the key vehicle for spreading HIV in Ukraine has been injecting drugs. According to the Ministry of Health's Ukrainian Center for Preventing and Fighting AIDS, injecting drug users (IDUs) constitute nearly 70% of all HIV-infected and their numbers are steadily growing. Official statistics registered 31,080 individuals in 1991 and 119,965 in 2003. According to expert estimates, to calculate the real number of IDUs alone, this figure should be multiplied by five.

Drug addiction is a disease. As a result of the symptoms of this disease, IDUs are socially an unfortunate, marginalized group of the population. Among the key symptoms of drug abuse is the risky behavior of drug addicts. On one hand, risky behavior makes the IDUs themselves very vulnerable to infection. On the other, it poses a threat of spreading HIV among other groups of the population.

In addition to HIV-related risks, drug abuse can also become a spur to criminal behavior as the need to find money to buy drugs grows. An IDU who has been taking drugs for 1–2 years tends to steadily increase the dose. At this point, the daily need for money to buy drugs typically ranges between UAH 50 and UAH 100. But many IDUs do not work and have no stable source of income. This pushes them into the world of crime, where they either start dealing drugs or become petty thieves, robbers or burglars.

Current government policy is not working

The epidemic levels HIV/AIDS and other socially harmful consequences of drug addiction in Ukraine point to the fact that current government policy is not reducing the spread of the disease. It is in the interest of all of Ukrainian society to change this state of affairs as soon as possible. But such changes are possible only on condition that task-oriented, proactive and coordinated actions are undertaken by government bodies, NGOs, international donors, specialized organizations, and the society as a whole.

ICPS issues an invitation to debate government policy

The International Centre for Policy Studies jointly with the All-Ukrainian Harm Reduction Association is holding a series of public debates on fighting the spread of HIV/AIDS epidemic in Ukraine. These events will take place under the Policy Campaign for Drug Abuse Harm Reduction project, financed by the International Renaissance Foundation and the International Harm Reduction Program of the Open Society Institute, New York.

ICPS invites representatives of the government, business and community organizations whose activities are related to HIV/AIDS and drug addiction in Ukraine to participate in the dialog. This should result in a common vision of current problems and solutions that will be the basis for recommendations for developing effective government policy. The debates will focus on the New Drug Abuse Harm Reduction Policy paper (available at www.icps.kiev.ua/library.html?24 in Ukrainian).

Public debates will be held according to this schedule:

- 18 January – Luhansk, Poltava;
- 20 January – Dnipropetrovsk, Znamianka;
- 25 January – Odesa;
- 27 January – Mykolayiv, Chernivtsi;
- 28 January – Simferopol;
- 1 February – L'viv, Uzhhorod;
- 8 February – Kyiv.

For information on participation, contact Irma Pidtepa at ICPS by telephone at (380-44) 236-4377, and via e-mail at ipidtepa@icps.kiev.ua or contact regional organizations participating in the project. These are listed on the project's web site at www.icps.kiev.ua/doc/harmred_partners.doc (in Ukrainian).

Those with political power have to take the lead in this process.

There are four groups of factors behind the threat posed by the spread of the HIV epidemic and resources should be focused on combating these factors.

Basic flaws in policy development, adoption and implementation:

- Despite numerous declarations about the importance of preventing the spread of HIV, the Government and politicians do not really understand the HIV/AIDS threat. No political force has made the fight against HIV a top priority;
- National programs do not have goals expressed in concrete numbers, while government policy tends to be based neither on reliable statistical data about the situation, nor on analysis of previous efforts;
- Lack of a common strategy and coordinated efforts results in duplication or contradictory measures being undertaken;
- Most anti-HIV programs are underfinanced. Even the planned level of funding does not meet the country's real needs;
- There is no system for monitoring government program results, which leads to uncontrolled and ineffective use of Budget funds.

Inadequate policies towards IDUs. The government tends to follow an IDU policy that simultaneously pursues two incompatible goals. On one hand, it aims at fully eliminating drug addiction in Ukrainian society through prosecution by police and the forced treatment of drug addicts. On the other, it applies measures aimed at reducing harm from drug addiction, which requires a tolerant attitude towards drug users based on the realization that a phenomenon such as drug addiction will inevitably exist in society. This kind of approach is implemented through Dovira consultation centers under the state-run Youth Services Centers and is subsidized by the State and local budgets, as well as by civic organizations using funds from international donors. However, the range of measures envisaged by harm reduction strategies cannot be effectively implemented as long as IDUs are prosecuted and discriminated.

Legislation aimed at completely eliminating drug addiction. In particular, the Criminal Code requires that drug addicts be held criminally accountable for buying or storing narcotic substances for personal use, although drug use itself was formally de-criminalized long ago. The absolute majority of those taken to court under this article are drug addicts who, according to the European Union position, are victims of drug-related organized crime.

The current systematic reporting of police agencies raises special concern. Police officers have to report on the number of criminal cases that are launched, which often results in subjecting IDUs to banned methods of interrogation and preliminary investigation in order to "produce" necessary indicators.

Negative social attitudes: the stigmatization of IDUs. Ukrainian society exhibits fairly active social discrimination towards IDUs. This is why representatives of risk groups cannot receive the necessary range of medical services, social support and job-search assistance. A typical feature of IDUs is that they have no profession or legal source of income, they lose their homes, they lose useful social contacts, and they have family problems. The stigmatization of IDUs and people living with HIV aggravates the negative consequences of drug addiction for the society as a whole. The roots of this situation are in an underdeveloped social infrastructure that might provide the necessary assistance with rehabilitation and social reintegration; insufficient informational and educational work among the general public; and ineffective measures to ensure safety for those working with risk groups.

Government policy options

1. Maintaining current policy towards IDUs. This option is based on the assumption that current measures are enough to tackle the problem of the spread of HIV/AIDS. In other words, the government need not change its approaches, priorities or tools for influencing IDUs. Although this option does not require additional efforts on the part of the state, a strong point against it is that the epidemic will only grow worse unless current policy is changed. Implementing only select elements of harm reduction policy and the criminal

prosecution of drug addicts could reduce negative consequences for the society, but it cannot alter the situation as a whole.

2. Strengthening persecution of IDUs.

This option is based on the assumption that it is possible to fully eliminate drug addiction and along with it the negative consequences to society through repressive measures alone. This approach includes:

- increasing the penalties for taking drugs;
- terminating harm reduction measures;
- refusing IDUs access to social and medical services and providing these services only to those who can quit taking drugs.

The experience of many countries shows that it is impossible to completely eliminate drug addiction even using the most aggressive approaches. This clearly speaks against using this option. If persecution is increased, drug addicts begin to avoid any contacts whatsoever with government bodies and this will make them almost completely isolated from programs aimed at preventing and treating HIV/AIDS. The negative consequences for the society will only grow worse.

3. Introducing a full harm reduction policy.

This option starts with an admission that it is impossible to fully "rescue" a society from drug addiction and it is based on the understanding that the key is to minimize the inevitable harm for society as a whole. Introducing harm reduction policy in full envisages the implementation of two principal components:

- giving up the criminal prosecution of people suffering from drug addiction;
- fostering the social inclusion of drug addicts and the people living with HIV, in particular improving the quality and access to social and medical services provided to them.

Opponents of such a policy say that the government has a shortage of funds to provide proper medical services for sick children, the disabled and the elderly and should not care more for drug addicts and those suffering from HIV. They consider criminal prosecution of IDUs acceptable. ■

For additional information on drug abuse harm reduction, contact Andriy Bega by telephone at (380-44) 236-4477, or via e-mail at abega@icps.kiev.ua

icps newsletter is a weekly publication of the International Centre for Policy Studies, delivered by electronic mail. To be included in the distribution list, mail your request to: marketing@icps.kiev.ua.

icps newsletter editor: Yevhen Shulha (shulha@icps.kiev.ua)
Phone: (380-44) 236-4477. Fax: (380-44) 236-4668
English text editor: L.A. Wolanskyj
Articles may be reprinted with ICPS consent.

The International Centre for Policy Studies is an independent research organization whose mandate is to promote the introduction of public policy concepts and practices in Ukraine. This is achieved by increasing the know-how of key government officials for policy choices, formulation and debate, and the awareness of the public-at-large of the benefits of policy.

Address: vul. Pymonenka 13A, Kyiv, Ukraine 04050
Web-site: <http://www.icps.com.ua/eng/>