

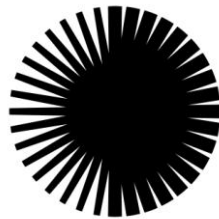
# Reform in Drug Policy

---

Presented to the Justice Reform Commission

Robert Callus on behalf of Alternattiva Demokratika

26 July 2013



Removing drug users from the streets to behind bars has failed miserably. An abundant amount of research shows that treating people as people with a problem rather than as criminals will actually reduce drug addiction and the problems it creates. Taking a different approach, as a country, we can make a significant step forward in tackling this serious and escalating problem.

## **Alternattiva Demokratika – The Green Party Position Paper on Reform in Drug Policy**

All countries in the world use a combination of 4 measures to tackle the ever increasing drug problem. These are: Prevention, treatment, harm reduction and punishment.

Unfortunately most countries (including Malta) have so far focused too much on punishment at the expense of the other three. The biggest problem with punishing drug users is not only that it utilises financial and human resources that could have been used for the other three measures but also that it directly interferes in their success rate.

The Portuguese model is so successful mostly for this reason. Hard drug use, crime and transmitted diseases would not have significantly decreased if it just decriminalized personal use (removal of punishment.) What Portugal did was to take this opportunity to strengthen the other three more successful measures in combating this problem.

### **Prevention**

Most drug users start at a young age, mostly in their early and mid-teens.

There is a surmounting amount of research on why some young people take drugs (and/or become addicted on them) and some don't. For instance self esteem, vulnerability to peer pressure and stability in the family are the most common of variables that indicate whether a person is at more at risk than others.

However, as simple as this may seem, there is one common reason that comes out clear from any research available or even from a short conversation with a drug user: **These people use drugs because they believe they need them.** (The only possible exception to this rule of thumb is in the case of people who have used drugs occasionally due to peer pressure only. However these people are the least likely to become drug addicts and one should be more concerned about the rest).

Be it to overcome shyness, depression, anxiety, or tiredness, drug users – especially the ones who go on to become addicts – feel, at that point in time that the pros of overcoming that negative feeling are higher than the cons of using the drugs.

On the other hand, as is made clear in the Global Commission Report on Drug Policy, <http://www.globalcommissionondrugs.org/reports/> fear of the law (unlike fear of addiction) is not a common deterrent for young people not to take drugs.

Thus in order to prevent as many people as possible from commencing drug use society needs to focus on our children's coping mechanisms because if that fails, they are very likely to try to cope with drugs, irrespective of whether they legal or not.

### **Treatment**

According to Hazelden's drug treatment organization [www.hazelden.org](http://www.hazelden.org) (whose extensive work on the 12 step model is widely used with very successful results today including in Gozo's OASI rehabilitation centre), drug addiction is a disease and should be treated as a disease by policy makers.

Just as HIV or cancer will not go away if you threaten the afflicted with punishment, neither will drug addiction.

Thus, our first goal is to get as many addicts as possible to realize that they actually need to be treated. Once again this is what Portugal managed to do with successful results.

Since decriminalization, if a person is caught with drugs for personal use in Portugal, all he is obliged to do is one thing: Be interviewed by a Commission for the Dissuasion of Drug Addiction which consists of a social worker, a psychiatrist and an attorney. Though the Commission does have limited powers (including imposing a fine of up to 150 Euro if a person refuses treatment) its main aim is to give advice and if need be invite people to seek further help. (see: <http://www.cato.org/publications/commentary/drug-decriminalization-policy-pays> ).

The rationale behind this is that while society has literally "lost" every person arrested for drug possession by placing him/her on the wrong side of the law, through this system, a substantial amount of these people realize that they do need help and that society is offering it.

Instead of burning bridges with drug addicts, it works on building them.

Once again, the increase in demand for treatment services is financed by money that would have otherwise been spent on prosecuting drug addicts.

## **Harm Reduction**

Some addicts, either just cannot quit (once again this depends on numerous variables such as age of onset of drug use, social support networks, childhood traumas etc) or do not consider it the right time to do so.

While complete abstinence should always be the ideal to be reached, the concept of harm reduction is that "if you're still going to use, at least do it in the least harmful manner, for yourself and others".

Malta already practices harm reduction such as through free syringe distribution and methadone maintenance programmes.

More can be done especially if more resources are allocated. The possibility of prescribed heroin for long-term addicts as practiced in the UK and Switzerland should also be explored (the substances added to street heroin are usually more harmful than the heroin itself).

Aside from the financial aspect, criminalizing drug addicts is also working against harm reduction in a psychological sense. If that same society that is telling you that you are a criminal and should be punished is the same one telling you on the need for clean syringes or

that many diseases can be also transmitted from the spoon (on which the heroin is cooked) apart from the syringe, you are less likely to take that advice.

## **Conclusion**

We hope that in this brief position paper we have provided enough arguments to show that we need to move towards a more humane policy towards drug use and addiction. Not only because it is morally the right thing to do but also because it is more successful.

We should not fool ourselves that the day will come when we win the war on drugs. Drugs are here to stay. If we do move away from a populist policy, that may provide a feel good factor by temporarily removing people from the streets to behind bars, but has so miserably failed, towards one that an abundant amount of research shows will actually reduce drug addiction and the problems it creates, we can make a significant step forward in tackling this serious and escalating problem.

26<sup>th</sup> July 2013