

# **Health Based approach to Drug Policy:**

## **Report Back Session from Breakout sessions**

**Prof Susanne Macgregor, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine**

It is important to avoid a polarised discussion. Opposing harm reduction to abstinence or legalization to prohibition is not helpful. It is necessary to seek a balanced approach which will involve proportionate responses to problems in particular countries based on evidence and research. Harm reduction is not just a list of techniques e.g. needle and syringe programmes, but must focus on the concept of harm and having that principle at the root of the policy to prevent harm and alleviate suffering when that arises. This will vary from country to country. Building capacity and institutions, creating networks of practitioners and learning from the experience of different countries is important. We also need to recognize the situation is constantly changing e.g. what is happening in East Africa could happen in West Africa, so sharing best practice is important.

**Dr Andrew Ball, World Health Organization**

As an international civil servant working on public health, I recognize that parliamentarians have an influential role in critical decisions related to drug policy and public health and these have very broad implications beyond both sectors. Drug policy is a controversial subject and it is hard to balance very strong opinions from different perspectives based on real concerns and real examples. To balance these views requires a special skill and understanding. It is important to make sure all decisions are informed and based on evidence. Even policies that seem to make good sense won't mean that they are good practice or that they are evidence-based. Coherence between national narcotic drug control bodies and public health ministries is also very important. Drug control officials have taken leadership in public health e.g. in some countries it is actually prison managers who argue for alternatives to incarceration and a health based approach to drug policy. Public health can influence drug policy and vice versa. The message for parliamentarians is to promote policies, regulation and legislation which:

- Creates a supportive environment for critical evidence-based interventions for good public health practice to be applied
- Seeks ways in which marginalization of drug users and their sexual partners is prevented so that they are not driven underground
- Minimizes the risk of new and harmful drug use, new drug production and trafficking whereby public health issues are addressed
- Looks at policies and legislation that will help prevent a transition from a less harmful way of using drugs to a more harmful way of using drugs e.g. from smoking to injecting

There is a clear need for a harmonization of policies and practices at all levels e.g. local, central and federal level. Given that public health and drug policy are cross-border issues, it is important for international fora such as this one to discuss what can be done across borders.