Young people call on drug policy makers to reassess their commitment to youth

While Member States meet in Vienna to discuss global drug policies, the current system based on prohibition leads to significantly increased harm and suffering to us, younger generations. Today, we are questioning the commitment of world leaders to our health and wellbeing.

21 March, Vienna, Austria- A primary justification for punitive drug policies is that they are necessary to protect young people from the ‘evils’ of drug use and addiction. This rationale has had tremendous appeal and has been used to defend our current drug policy system persuasively and pervasively.

Young people attending the 54th Session of the Commission on Narcotic Drugs are discrediting this fundamental argument too often used to support the ‘war on drugs’. Far from protecting young people from drug use, current drug policies based on prohibition and law enforcement serve to increase harms to the very young people they claim to protect. Policies grounded in public health and human rights urgently need to replace misguided punitive approaches in order to serve the best interests of children and young people.

The young delegates express concerns echoed by the Committee on the Rights of the Child, who recently issued recommendations for the introduction of policies that aim to reduce harm for children and young people in the Ukraine, including the decriminalisation of drug use and possession, and youth-friendly harm reduction services.

‘We repeatedly hear from policy makers how children and young people need to be protected from drugs and the harmful consequences of their use, however young people are never asked how best to do this. Include us in drug policy dialogue and we will tell you that these policies are causing young people much more pain and suffering, and in many cases costing young people their lives’, says Anita Krug, International Coordinator for Youth RISE, an international youth-led network advocating for more humane drug polices for young people.

The harming impacts of current drug policy on young people are far reaching. From denial of access to life saving health services, to reduced employment and educational opportunities, to children being caught up in deadly drug war violence in producing and transit countries.

Concern for the health and wellbeing of young people must be reflected in policies, and therefore should aim to mitigate harms associated with drug use, not exacerbate them. Young people from around the world call on the Commission of Narcotic Drugs, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, and most importantly the governments of Member States to:

• **Decriminalise drug use and possession for young drug users**: Young people are criminalised for drug use, and in many countries around the world may be sent to mandatory treatment or rehabilitation facilities, or jail if apprehended by police. This has far-reaching consequences for the young person, including reduced education and employment opportunities.

• **Eliminate all barriers to young people’s access to life saving harm reduction services**: Barriers to access include arbitrary age restrictions, requirement of parental consent, stigma and discrimination.

• **Adopt policies that adhere to the Convention of the Rights of the Child (CRC)**: Member states should recall the principles of non-discrimination, the best interests of the child, the right to life, survival and development, and the right to participation. These are enshrined in the CRC, and are critical for guiding policies and response.

• **Ensure the meaningful participation of young drug users and young people affected by drug policy**: As a most affected population, young people must be meaningfully engaged in drug policy and programme development, implementation and evaluation at all
levels. Young people who use drugs have a right to be included in the decisions that affect their lives.

- **Ensure policies are not having secondary effects on our young people in drug producing and transit countries and regions:** A disastrous consequence of prohibition is organised crime and violence in producing and transit countries. Children and young people are increasingly becoming casualties of the ‘war on drugs’, are caught up in the violence and are most affected by its impact.

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This statement is endorsed by the following youth-led organisations and networks: