



Feature story

Young drug users in Latin America need a stronger HIV response

26 September 2011



The 3rd Conference on Drug Policies in Latin America that took place in Mexico City from 13-14 September brought together experts, academics, civil society organizations legislators and decision makers to discuss drug consumption trends, drug related problems and the policies and interventions developed in the region.

This year, there has been a very active participation from young people in the conference according to Aram Barra, programme director for youth and drugs in ESPOLEA—a Mexican youth platform working on gender, HIV and drugs from a human rights perspective. “We have been gathering a group of young activists since 2009 to promote the inclusion of young drug users in the yearly conference,” he explains. “This year we have made a difference. We moved from being passive spectators to taking active part in the discussions on an equal footing with experts and other decision makers,” said Mr Barra.

Over the course of three days, the conference promoted a social debate around different issues such as HIV among injecting drug users as well as the need for evidence based information covering the situation of youth and policies based on human rights. Reducing by 50% the number of new HIV infections among injecting drug users by 2015, as stated in the political declaration agreed by Member States at the 2011 High Level Meeting on AIDS was a constant reference throughout the conference.

The HIV epidemic in Latin America is mainly concentrated among men who have sex with men and transgender people. However, some countries like Brazil, Uruguay, Argentina and Mexico are showing prevalence rates around 5 % among injecting drug users.

“We need political will in Latin America to implement the right harm reduction policies and opioid substitution therapy programmes. We need to increase access to information about HIV, clean needles and syringes, create peer support environment and, for people infected with HIV, provide timely access to effective

antiretroviral therapy,” said Enrique Zelaya, the UNAIDS Coordinator for Guatemala and Mexico.

The youth in ESPOLEA emphasized the need for a supportive environment to make the goal set in the 2011 Political Declaration achievable in Latin America. “We need to see policy change that decriminalizes drug users and implement harm reduction programmes that take young drug users needs into account”.

According to the youth group, the young crack users in the suburbs of Montevideo and the injecting drug users at the Mexican borders are part of a diverse group of drug users all with different needs and exposing themselves to different risks. There is a need to respond to these complex realities when policies are developed and services put in place.

“The youth need to be involved to make programmes work on the ground and increase their impact. Working together with UNAIDS, UNODC and governments we can achieve the goal of reducing infections by 50 % among injecting drug users,” concluded Aram Barra.

Targets and commitments

Preventing HIV among drug users

Reducing sexual transmission

Region/country

Mexico

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