

68TH SESSION OF THE
COMMISSION ON NARCOTIC DRUGS

20
25

SIDE EVENT REPORT



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Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	_____	01
Overview	_____	02
Discussion summary	_____	03
Key challenges	_____	05
Good practices	_____	07
Recommendations	_____	09
Resources	_____	11

Acknowledgements

Youth RISE extends our deepest gratitude to all those who contributed to the success of the side event, **“I wish they had told us how to be safe”: Youth-Centred and Human Rights Compliant Drug Harm Reduction Education**, held during the 68th session of the Commission on Narcotic Drugs. The side event was co-sponsored by:



The views and opinions expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the official policy or positioning of the co-sponsoring organisations

We are especially thankful to the panelists - **Joanne Csete** (Columbia University), **Damon Barrett** (University of Gothenburg), **Nina Rose Fischer** (City University of New York), **Isaac Olushola** (Students for Sensible Drug Policy), **Carolina Ahumada** (Intercambios Asociación Civil), and **Susanna Ronconi** (Forum Droghe)-for sharing their expertise, research, and experiences from diverse contexts. Their insights were instrumental in highlighting the urgent need for evidence-based, inclusive, and rights-respecting harm reduction education for young people. We appreciate the thoughtful moderation by **Rebeca Calzada** (Youth RISE), as well as the opening and closing remarks delivered by **Nathalia Dutra** (SENAD-Brazil) and **Silvia Dimitrova** (OHCHR), which framed the discussion within the broader context of international human rights and public health.

Our sincere thanks go to the young people, educators, and community members whose lived experiences and perspectives continue to guide our advocacy. Their voices, as reflected in our research and throughout this event, remind us that meaningful youth participation is essential for effective harm reduction and drug education policies. We also acknowledge the ongoing support of our partners, including civil society organizations, academic institutions, and international bodies, whose collaboration strengthens our collective efforts, and the co-sponsors who have endorsed this side event.

Finally, we express our special appreciation to **the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR)** for their generous sponsorship and funding, which made this event and report possible. Their support has been vital in amplifying youth voices and advancing human rights-compliant drug policies.



Report written by Rebeca Marques Rocha
Reviewed by Ruby Lawlor and Rebeca Calzada
Designed by Rebeca Marques Rocha

Overview

Event title:

“I wish they had told us how to be safe”: Youth-Centred and Human Rights Compliant Drug Harm Reduction Education

The 2023 Report of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights highlighted the valuable role of civil society, people who use drugs, and youth in shaping drug policies that reflect real-world experiences. Additionally, the recent 2024 Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Right to Health calls for the full implementation of harm reduction policies, including comprehensive education and public awareness campaigns. Despite clear international recommendations, drug education in many countries remains abstinence-based, disconnected from reality, and delivered through a criminalization lens.

Youth RISE's side event, held during the 68th session of the Commission on Narcotic Drugs (CND), emphasized the importance of drug harm reduction education for young people, highlighting its role in promoting better health outcomes and informed decision-making.

The panel included **Joanne Csete** (Columbia University), who discussed the limitations of abstinence-only approaches; **Damon Barrett** (University of Gothenburg), who explored policy challenges in harm reduction education; **Nina Rose Fischer** (City University of New York), who presented on an evaluation of the Stanford's REACH Lab's "Safety First" curriculum; **Isaac Olushola** (Students for Sensible Drug Policy), who presented the work of Students for Sensible Drug Policy in Nigeria; **Carolina Ahumada** (Intercambios Asociación Civil), contributing with insights from a program on adolescents, drugs, and mental health at a school in González Catán, Argentina, between 2012-2022; and **Susanna Ronconi** (Forum Droghe), who presented the findings from a research on student's perceptions of school-based drug curricula in Italy.

The event highlighted the need for inclusive, evidence-based and human rights-compliant education to empower youth to make informed health choices. It was moderated by **Rebeca Calzada** (Youth RISE) and included opening remarks by **Nathalia Dutra** (SENAD-Brazil) and closing remarks by **Silvia Dimitrova** (OHCHR).

Discussion summary

Drug education curriculum in many countries remains abstinence-based and delivered through a criminalization lens. This approach not only excludes young people but also fails to equip them with the knowledge and tools they need to stay safe — whether they choose to use drugs or not. Youth RISE’s research revealed how current drug education — often focused on fear-mongering and reproducing punitive approaches — misses the mark. By the time young people received formal lessons, many had already encountered drugs, formed their own perceptions, distrusted educational institutions and, in some cases, experienced punitive policing firsthand.

The research shows that young people want a gradual, repeated, and practical education that helps them understand how drugs work, how to navigate situations where drugs are present (whether these are used or not), how to respond to peer emergencies, and how to stay safe and reduce harm. That demands culturally sensitive approaches that recognize young people’s diverse backgrounds and life experiences, rather than imposing a one-size-fits-all narrative. Evidence shows that young people respond well to experiential, interactive learning methods rather than fear-based messaging.

During Youth RISE’s side event at the 68th CND session, experts emphasized that harm reduction education should be age-appropriate, while recognizing young people’s evolving capacities. Schools should be educational environments equipping pupils with the needed tools to critically engage and respond to everyday life decisions and challenges. Instead of reproducing punitive drug policy approaches, schools should function as safe spaces for open discussions about drugs, without fear of punishment or judgment.

The presentations highlighted successful models of harm reduction education from different countries, including school curricula, peer education programs, and community-based initiatives. Each case demonstrates that harm reduction-based drug education can prevent and better respond to drug-related overdoses, increase knowledge about substances, improve risk assessment skills, and teach practical harm reduction strategies. Importantly, in some cases, contrary to common concerns, harm reduction education did not increase drug use and may actually have contributed to reducing it by providing young people with accurate information.

Key challenges



ABSTINENCE-ONLY BIAS

Traditional abstinence-only and fear-based drug education fails to prepare young people for real-world interactions with drugs



DISTRUST IN AVAILABLE DRUG CURRICULUM

Young people consistently identify school as their least trusted source of drug information



SCHOOL-TO-PRISON PIPELINE

Schools may report drug offenses to police, creating a "school-to-prison pipeline"



LACK OF AGE-APPROPRIATE DRUG EDUCATION

There is a lack of age-appropriate drug education approaches for younger adolescents



STIGMA TOWARDS YOUNG PEOPLE WHO USE DRUGS

Young people who use drugs are often silenced, isolated or stigmatized in educational settings



PUNISHMENT AND MARGINALIZATION

Students from marginalized communities face disproportionate punishment for drug-related issues



LACK OF EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS

Drug education frequently lacks practical information on responding to emergencies like overdoses



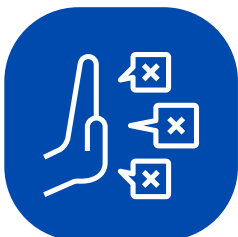
UNTRAINED TEACHERS AND SCHOOLS

Teachers and schools often lack proper training in harm reduction principles



INCONSISTENT FUNDING

Funding for harm reduction education programs is limited or inconsistent



RESISTANCE TO HARM REDUCTION PRINCIPLES

Cultural and political resistance to harm reduction approaches persists in many contexts

Good practices

The relationship between students and teachers should be one of co-creation for problem-solving rather than simply imposing information. Educators should refrain from isolating students who have initiated drug use, as social exclusion can be a determining factor in the development of drug dependence disorders.

Preventing pupils from connecting with their communities during their formative years reproduces prison-like sentences, which cause more harm than good and bring long-lasting consequences to a young person's life. Instead, identified students should be connected to stigma-free harm reduction and social services, strongly rooted in community building, and aimed at promoting individuals' health and well-being.

Below, we summarize a list of examples and good practices for developing and implementing drug education programs that focus on co-creating curriculum with students, to shape information programs that are human rights compliant, practical, evidence-based, and stigma-free.

Safety First curriculum

A harm reduction-based drug education program for high school students showing significant improvements in knowledge, attitudes, and harm reduction skills

Just Say Know

Training developed by Students for Sensible Drug Policy to equip student educators and provide evidence-based information about drugs without judgment

**“No Te Sientas
Zarpado”**

(“Don’t Feel Overwhelmed”)

A comprehensive program in Argentina that implemented workshops, listening centers, peer education, and community outreach, reaching over 8,000 adolescents

**“Conoscere
Prima”**

(“Knowing Before”)

An adaptation of harm reduction principles in Italian schools that respects students' intelligence and experiences

PRONASCI Youth:

Brazil's national initiative addressing cycles of violence and exclusion through harm reduction strategies and economic opportunities

**Participatory
research methods:**

Involving young people in designing and evaluating drug education to ensure relevance

**Interactive learning
approaches**

Using demonstrations, scenarios, and experiential activities rather than lectures

Recommendations

01

Move beyond abstinence-only approaches

Replace abstinence-only approaches with evidence-based, age-appropriate and culturally-sensitive harm reduction education that respects young people's agency;

02

Co-produce drug education

Include young people in designing, implementing, and evaluating drug education programs;

03

Disseminate stigma-free information

Provide accurate, honest information about substances without moral judgment;

04

Balance theory and practice

Teach practical harm reduction skills including overdose response, drug checking, and safer use practices;

05

Build safe spaces

Create safe spaces in schools where students can speak openly about drugs without fear of punishment;

06

Train educators adequately

Train educators in harm reduction principles and interactive teaching methods;

07

Foster respectful interventions

Recognize and respect the knowledge and experiences of young people who use drugs;

08

Promote age appropriate harm reduction

Develop age-appropriate harm reduction approaches for younger adolescents;

09

Design sensible responses

Address stigma and discrimination in educational systems;

10

Center human rights

Implement international human rights standards in drug policy and education.

Resources

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