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# Policy Advocacy Briefing Paper

## Introduction

Southeast Asia grapples with a profound drug and health crisis that reverberates across individuals, communities, and societies. In the face of this multifaceted challenge, the region contends with the enduring legacy of punitive drug policies and measures, unchallenged for six decades. These policies, rooted in the context of criminalizing drug use with heavy punitive responses have been demonstrably unsuccessful. They continue to significantly weaken national responses to HIV, HCV, and TB, exacerbate stigma and discrimination, hinder harm reduction financing, perpetuate health and social inequities and contribute significantly to negative perceptions of people who use drugs.

## Key Role of Academies of Sciences

Amidst this complex landscape, Academies of Sciences emerge as influential arbiters, wielding the power to shape public health policies. With their ability to provide expert advice to governments, parliaments and universities, these Academies hold a unique position to drive evidence-based change in the realm of drug policies, harm reduction and public and community attitudes towards people who use drugs. The following briefing paper seeks to underscore the critical importance of the Academies of Sciences adopting a more evidence-based approach towards harm reduction in advocating for harm reduction strategies within their advisory mandates.

## Advancing Evidence-Based Approaches for Harm Reduction Public Health in Academies of Sciences

By AHRA



## Acknowledging Challenges

It is important to recognize the historical context in which Academies operate. Despite their pivotal role, Academies face significant obstacles in challenging the deeply entrenched, decades-old punitive drug policies. These policies, often unsupported by scientific evidence, have harmed the lives of individuals, communities, and societies while severely limiting people's right to health. While navigating these complexities, this paper aims to encourage a shift towards evidence-based approaches while recognizing the historical constraints in which the Academies operate.

Through this advocacy, the briefing paper seeks to pave the way for a pragmatic and direct pathway towards Academies' participation in this dialogue, urging Academies to consider the global and local realities of harm reduction within the broader framework of public health and financing policies.

## Background

Harm reduction is a proven public health strategy that mitigates the adverse effects of substance use, promoting health and well-being among affected populations. Indeed, the harm reduction approach has positively influenced health policies and service delivery far beyond substance use. However, gaps persist in translating evidence into policy, hindering the adoption of harm reduction measures. Academies of Sciences can drive impactful change by championing evidence-based approaches in their advisory role.

## Key Arguments

### Public Health Impact

The cascade of evidence-based harm reduction service delivery and measures, such as, but not restricted to, needle syringe programs, opioid substitution treatment, overdose management and supervised consumption sites, have demonstrated significant reductions in the transmission of blood-borne diseases, overdose fatalities, and societal burdens.

Adoption of these strategies aligns with the fundamental public health goal of minimizing harm and enhancing overall community well-being.

### Human Rights and Dignity

An evidence-based harm reduction approach respects the human rights and dignity of individuals who use drugs or drug dependent.

Policies informed by scientific evidence contribute to the creation of non-discriminatory environments, fostering inclusivity and reducing the stigma and exclusion associated with substance use.

"In Asia and the Pacific, one in eight individuals engaging in drug injection is living with HIV. Among this population, nine in ten are additionally burdened with Hepatitis C. Moreover, an estimated 17.45 million individuals using amphetamines are located in Asia, constituting 51% of the total global users."

### Economic Considerations

The implementation of evidence-based harm reduction measures is proven to be cost-effective. There is overwhelming evidence that it reduces the economic burden on healthcare systems by preventing infectious diseases such as HIV, viral hepatitis (HCV and HBV), TB, and overdose death, emergency medical interventions, and criminal justice costs.

Academies of Sciences are urged to emphasize the economic benefits and return on investment of harm reduction, showcasing the value of investing in preventive measures.