



## Britain should look to Asia for lessons on Drug Policy -

***Think-tank report draws on international lessons to formulate a drug policy that tackles social exclusion***

Western Governments are spending millions on drug misuse without tackling its root causes, according to a report on international lessons for UK drugs policy, published by the Foreign Policy Centre.

*From War to Work: Drug treatment, social inclusion and enterprise* by Rowena Young draws on case studies from five Asian countries. It argues that despite rising spending on prohibition Britain is now home to more than 500 times more addicts than there were in the Sixties and the levels of heroin on its streets put it among the world's top five consumers alongside countries like Iran and Pakistan. Even the much cited alternatives of drugs education and treatment have had limited success: the Government's own research shows drugs education fails to reduce drug use, while two thirds of drugs treatment fails and over nine in ten problem users relapse. The report warns there is a serious risk that the new National Treatment Agency, with an annual budget rising to nearly half a billion pounds, will simply fund more treatment which on its own cannot work.

The report argues that the drug debate is still more grounded in prejudice than fact, polarised between advocates of prohibition and health care – neither of which take account of the true causes of the drug problem. Whilst these entrenched positions will be slow to change, there are practical measures the Government can take now to reduce the impact of problematic drug use. Policies must be based on an understanding of the clear link between poverty and problematic drug use – for example unemployed people are seven times more likely to use hard drugs than people in work. Targets should shift from a blanket attempt to reduce all drug use to a strategy based on reducing their harmful effects among the socially excluded. Policy makers should look to Asia where grassroots community projects have successfully tackled deprivation by integrating treatment and counselling with efforts to find work and skills for their clients.

Organisations like *Nai Zindagi* in Pakistan, *Mukti Sadan* in India or *Pink Triangle* in Malaysia see themselves as economic enterprises as well as social or health ones. By creating jobs for recovering drug users they have found a way to generate income for themselves – from reconditioning jeeps and building environmentally friendly houses to running light industries.

Young claims that for decades drugs policy has lacked the pragmatism and an evidence-based approach that have dominated other areas of social policy like crime and unemployment.

Launched ahead of the Home Affairs Select Committee's review of drug laws and the Home Office's overhaul of its drugs strategy, *From War to Work* is an invitation to the Home Secretary to adopt a more effective approach and open up a more rigorous debate.

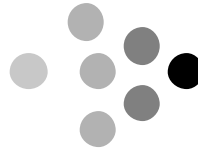
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## FROM WAR TO WORK: KEY FINDINGS:

- **Since the 1980s, problem drug-use has grown faster than ever before.** The number of addicts doubles every four years; the Office of National Statistics recorded a rise in heroin or morphine related deaths of 110 per cent between 1995 and 2000, up from 357 to 754 per year.
- **Government should focus its resources on tackling problem drug use rather than recreational drug use.** The harmful effects of drugs have more to do with different patterns of use than the distinction between hard and soft substances.
- **Western Governments are spending millions on unsuccessful policies.** 62 per cent of the drugs budget funds prohibition, 13 per cent funds predominantly medical treatment, 12 per cent funds drugs education which doesn't reduce consumption or the risk of addiction among young people at risk. The wider costs to public services due to drugs are estimated to be as much as £8 billion.
- **Increasing deprivation is the biggest factor in determining drug use.** The poorest areas in Britain account for 30 times as many drug-related hospital emergencies as the richest ones.
- **There is a need to find alternative sources of income and activity for addicts.** Ethnographic street studies have shown how "taking care of business" lends motivation, meaning and structure to a drug user's day, even more than the drugs themselves. Many former users have nothing to fall back on when stripped of their drug-using friendship groups and the interest of treatment staff.
- **The weight of evidence shows that prohibition has failed.** Given enough investment of resources, seizures can grow impressively, but the quantities of illicit drugs hitting the streets show an unerring ability to keep pace. A recent simultaneous crack-down on over two hundred known dealers in London made no perceptible dent in the market. Prices have remained stable or even fallen despite rising enforcement.
- **Drugs education has limited effectiveness:** A recent study by the Drugs Prevention Advisory Service showed that although 41 per cent of 14-16 year olds said they were less likely to take drugs after participating in a drug education course, a one year follow up investigation showed there had been no change in their drug use.
- **Treating drug addiction as purely a health issue has had limited success:** Two thirds of all treatment fails and more than nine in ten addicts relapse. Though it can reduce harmful behaviour and improve physical and emotional health, its ability to transform the features of a person's life that lead to drug use is doubtful.
- **Social enterprises which address long term drug users' needs under one roof are showing promising results.** 80 per cent of staff at projects like Nai Zindangi in Pakistan – which combines treatment and commerce – are stable or former street users. In India, Sharan has mobilised tens of thousands of drug users against the HIV pandemic,

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creating jobs and work in the process. The approach works in the UK too: a third of the clients of Kaleidoscope, a London-based treatment centre, work.

## RECOMMENDATIONS:

- **Government should develop a holistic approach that focuses on outcomes not inputs.** This would mean scrapping targets for a blanket reduction of drug use and concentrating instead on reducing harm. The National Treatment Agency would be renamed the National Drugs Rehabilitation Agency, and it would spend money on encouraging education, work and enterprise as well as treatment. More resources should be devolved to front line police units that have taken the lead in tackling the causes of drug misuse.
- **Bring in the private and voluntary sectors to provide training and work experience for problem drug users.** Private recruitment agencies like Reed Employment (who have already shown an interest in working with drug users) should be contracted to run programmes which combine recruitment, training, management, social support, transport, policy and payroll services which meet the needs of recovering drug-users.
- **Establish a Home Office funded business incubator** dedicated to stimulating social enterprises, based on the Asian model, which train and employ long-term drug users. It would be tasked with accelerating the growth of specialist enterprises to create 25 000 jobs within ten years.
- **Reform the benefit system to reduce disincentives to work.** Drug users taking the first steps in full-time learning, training or work placements can lose housing tenancies and support for child-care while their prospects of earning legitimate income are still low. Benefits assessors need sufficient flexibility to be able to judge what will help their clients, rather than imposing sanctions that will lead to repeated failure.

## Rowena Young said:

“The war on drugs has been a resounding failure. Rarely in the history of wars have so many achieved so little at such a high cost”

“The key issue is *not* the availability of drugs, but rather the problematic drug use caused by social exclusion. Any credible solutions need to address these causes if they are to have any chance of success”

“Successive Governments have presided over failing drugs policies. The Home Secretary has shown political leadership in changing the debate over migration and citizenship. He should do the same on drugs”

## NOTES TO EDITORS:

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1. Rowena Young is Development Director of Kaleidoscope, the UK's leading one-stop drug treatment agency. She established simplyworks in 2000 – a government supported pilot enterprise creating jobs for long-term drug users. Previously Rowena worked in journalism and at the thinktank Demos.
2. The views in this report are solely those of the author and should not be taken as those of the Foreign Policy Centre.
3. The Foreign Policy Centre was set up in 1998 by Prime Minister Tony Blair (Patron) and then Foreign Secretary Robin Cook (President) to explore the consequences of globalisation.