

ARE YOU EXPERIENCED?

Little by little, drug users are developing a growing influence on the international policy stage. And Australian users are showing the rest of the world how it's done at a national level. **Eliot Albert** on the rise of global drug user activism.

For the first time in three decades of activism by people who use drugs, we have an internationally recognised organisation, seen by many as being the voice of the global, drug using community. That group, the *International Network of People who Use Drugs* (INPUD), is now partnered on the international stage by the major players campaigning against the appalling situations in which people who use drugs around the world live. Focusing on injecting drug users, the sector of our community that faces the greatest human rights abuses and the most acute health problems, INPUD aims to provide a voice for a heavily marginalised, deeply oppressed community of some 26 million people globally.

In 2005, frustration at the poor facilities for drug users at the Belfast 16th *International Conference on the Reduction of Drug Related Harm* became the catalyst for an invigorated international network and led to the inception of INPUD. It was formed around a mission statement called the 'Vancouver Declaration', endorsed at a meeting of user activists at the 17th International Conference on

the Reduction of Drug Related Harm in Vancouver.

Although this was the product of many activists' efforts, a working group including representatives from Asia, Europe, Latin America, North America and Oceania undertook the initial process of transforming INPUD into a legal entity. The UK's Department for International Development provided funding for the development of INPUD, as part of a larger grant to the International Harm Reduction Association (IHRA).

After some initial struggles INPUD is developing into the organisation that many of us, and our predecessors, have been fighting for over the last few decades. INPUD's early phase encountered some constitutional difficulties and concerns about process. A subsequent crisis meeting was held at *Harm Reduction 2008: IHRA's 19th International Conference* in Barcelona, which led to a successful re-foundation General Meeting hosted by the Danish Drug Users' Union (*BrugerForeningen*) in Copenhagen at the end of October 2008 where a Consensus Statement

and a clearer infrastructure were both agreed to. Since then, a representative from INPUD was invited to give a formal address as part of the UK delegation to the United Nations' Commission on Narcotics Drugs (CND) in April 2009, while several other members attended as part of various NGO delegations. INPUD has now become recognised as the voice of the international drug users' movement by most of the major organisations, NGO's, and donors in the harm reduction and HIV/AIDS fields.

Drawing inspiration from the 'The Vancouver Declaration' and the widespread adoption of the slogan 'nothing about us without us', INPUD has forced partners to recognise that acknowledging and listening to the experiential knowledge that comes from the lived experience of being a user of illicit drugs is key to seeking solutions to the public health catastrophes, and human rights abuses, that prohibition drives. The full involvement of those who have first hand experience of living under the stigma and marginalisation that comes from being criminalised just for using your drug of choice is essential.

INPUD HAS MANAGED TO TRANSFORM THE SLOGAN 'NOTHING ABOUT US WITHOUT US' INTO A SUBSTANTIAL REALITY

This privileged information is crucial to forging innovative public health and human rights policies that can begin to ameliorate the conditions in which so many members of our community live.

For so many years, the drug using community was a minor partner in the harm reduction agenda. Increasing recognition of the failure of the policies and programmes that were being delivered, and constant demands to be heard, ensured that the involvement of people who use drugs in the formulation of policy became crucial. The growing maturity of INPUD has allowed us to begin to negotiate on our own terms. It is no longer possible for the global discussion on current drug policies to continue without the full involvement of those who are most acutely affected.

Certainly, INPUD has been forced to 'grow up' in the public spotlight and is proving itself more than adequate to meet the task. INPUD has negotiated partnerships with dozens of international NGOs in the public health, human rights, harm reduction, and HIV/AIDS fields and is rapidly becoming a fixture within public discourse on drug policy. Crucial to securing our ability to do this has been delicate negotiations with funders and major donors including the Department for International Development, the World Bank, Global Fund, and the Open Society Institute. That such major organisations are now prepared to sit down with and fund an organisation representing such a criminalised, marginalised, and heavily stigmatised community as ours is considerable testament to the tenacity and maturity that we are now demonstrating. It has also been made possible by the overwhelming success and widespread acceptability of harm reduction messages, and recognition of the impossibility of finding solutions without involving those most profoundly affected.

In June, INPUD members took part in the United Nations High Level Meeting



Bottom of the pile: Problem drug users in countries such as Indonesia have severely restricted human rights, which can lead to some (overleaf) being chained to posts as a form of treatment

on AIDS. The meeting is an especially important one as it marks three decades since the HIV epidemic broke out, one decade since the UN adopted time-bound measurable objectives, and five years since the commitment to achieve universal access for all to comprehensive HIV programmes by 2010, a commitment that has not been met. INPUD will be especially keen to ensure that those delegations that are becoming hesitant about "including specific, time-bound and measurable targets for prevention, treatment and financing in the UN High Level Meeting outcome document" do not backtrack.

The final document issuing from the meeting, *Political Declaration on HIV/AIDS: Intensifying our Efforts to Eliminate HIV/AIDS*, explicitly recognises the need to address HIV transmission amongst people who use drugs, and includes a specific target of reducing HIV transmission amongst people who use drugs by half by 2015. However, this commitment is undercut by the statement that this must be done "in accordance with national laws".

Erin O'Mara, editor of drug user magazine *Black Poppy* and an INPUD organiser said: "The engagement with the entire HLM process via the civil society task force was, though cliché, a real rollercoaster. It hamstrung our movement and its voice with the

inference that we were unable to speak openly about criminalisation – something that is at the heart of every single issue that affects people who use drugs. For INPUD, it was another watershed moment for us on the global stage, and repeatedly showed donors and leaders of international organisations, just how our participation is key in an effective HIV response and resourcing our user networks will be crucial in the years ahead."

In an effort to draw increased attention to HIV-related harm reduction and injecting drug use, INPUD will join Harm Reduction International (formerly IHRA) to launch the 'Beirut Declaration on HIV and Injecting Drug Use' (named after the venue of the last international harm reduction conference). INPUD will also be keen to emphasise the importance of including injecting drug users as a key affected population. A major step towards this was the inclusion of people who use drugs as a key affected population in the International Council of AIDS Service Organisation's selection procedure for the Civil Society Task Force on HIV/AIDS, which met in April and included an INPUD member.

In conclusion, since the adoption of 'The Vancouver Declaration' in 2006, INPUD has managed to transform the slogan 'nothing about us without us' into



a substantial reality, with INPUD now a firmly established presence at the major international policy forums. However, in an atmosphere in which harm reduction is coming under increasing attack once again from the resurgent 'abstinence or nothing' lobby, we cannot afford to rest on our achievements thus far. While on the one hand, the edifice of prohibition is showing substantial cracks, and the human rights abuses suffered by people who use drugs are becoming increasingly recognised. On the other, many countries that were once bastions of harm reduction practice are starting to backslide, not least the UK and the

Netherlands. INPUD, with its partners, will continue to press its agenda until the iniquities of prohibition have become a faint memory, one more nightmare in the annals of human folly and cruelty.

■ **Dr Eliot Ross Albert**, PhD is INPUD's Membership Secretary

To join INPUD, please write to membership@inpud.net and to read more go to our website <http://www.inpud.net>

AUSSIE RULES

How a drug user's league in Australia is leading the way in national co-ordination

While organisations of people who use drugs have existed in countless countries worldwide for three decades, few have reached the longevity and degree of influence that can be attributed to the Australian Injecting and Illicit Drug Users League (AIVL). A national body representing people who use illicit drugs, AIVL covers "issues of national significance for people who use or have used illicit drugs". It has existed for 21 years, and been a fully funded organisation for fourteen of them. Throughout their history AIVL has consistently lobbied, and provided a voice for people who use illicit drugs in Australia. AIVL, as a peak organisation, does not accept individuals as members but is instead made up of a number of state and territory drug user organisations, providing them with a unifying national platform.

AIVL has focused much of its energy on making interventions into, and being involved in, national government policies and strategies in all areas that concern people who use drugs, on the basis that "without good drug policy at the government level, there is no effective drug treatment or needle and syringe programmes".

AIVL received its first significant national funding in 1998 for a two-year national Hepatitis-C education and prevention programme for people who inject illicit drugs, and ever since, its focus has been on injecting drug users, identifying them as being the sector of the drug using population most subject to human rights abuses, stigmatisation, and health problems. This initial programme was so successful that it has continued to be funded up to now on a rolling one-year funding cycle.

One area of national policy in which AIVL has had particular success was in its involvement, between 2000 and 2005, in the campaign to prevent the introduction of retractable syringes. The company pushing for their introduction advocated for them on the basis that because the needle 'retracted' after use, it would lead to a reduction in the transmission of BBVs. Having studied the technology, AIVL discovered that in fact the syringes could be reused, but couldn't be washed, and so concluded that rather than preventing BBVs, they would, in particular in prison environments, foster their transmission. AIVL were invited onto the national committee convened to discuss

the technology and having lobbied heavily against their introduction were successful in persuading the government to cease piloting them and indefinitely postpone the AUD\$17.5 million retractable needle & syringe technology initiative.

AIVL's success in this area is a seminal example of how a well organised national interest group of people who use drugs can, through involvement in the political process, rigorous lobbying, and grassroots activism, influence policy on a crucial issue affecting the lives of people who use drugs.

...meanwhile in Britain

It is ironic that whilst the UK was one of the first countries to embark on the provision of widespread harm reduction services, and can for good reason claim to be the birthplace of harm reduction, it has never had an equivalent to AIVL. The reasons for this absence are complex and manifold. Since the 2001 Health and Social Care Act there has been a statutory obligation for health and social services to involve service users in the course, design and delivery of treatment. The National Treatment Agency for Substance Misuse Treatment (NTA), also established in 2001, has been responsible for implementing this requirement in the drugs field. User involvement is expected at all levels within treatment systems and resources are provided to support it. However, most of the user activism in the UK over at least the last decade has been tied to a model of treatment consumerism rather than the wider issues of drug users' rights.

The last attempt to establish a national, activist-based organisation led by people who use drugs and based on human rights principles, the (now defunct) National Drug Users Development Agency (NDUDA) received little support. Ultimately, its inability to gain funding led to its demise. There are, however, flourishing local groups, which have reached beyond a treatment consumerist agenda, and the UK is home to a number of prominent international activists. Attempts to build a national organisation have been mired in debates over direction and at present the closest thing we have is the unfunded National Users' Network which exists only as a virtual network and whose activities are largely limited.