Human Rights Challenges in the Drug area in Sweden

General comments on the importance of human rights in drugs policy

Full respect for human dignity, human rights, and fundamental freedoms must constitute a cornerstone of drug policy. States must respect, protect and promote human rights and fundamental freedoms as well as the inherent dignity of all individuals and the rule of law in the development and implementation of all drug policies. Sweden believes that international drug policy should be based on a public health-based approach with human rights as a foundation. When countering drug related crime (including violence, trafficking and corruption), and ensuring public safety and security, human rights must be respected. The death penalty and any other forms of cruel, inhumane and degrading punishments for drug-related offences must be abolished. Measures need to be taken to improve the situation for all people in vulnerable and marginalised situations and to reduce stigma and discrimination. The treatment gap for women with drug use disorder must be closed. Civil society plays a key role in promoting human rights in drug policy. Gender equality must not be treated as a separate track, but as an integral part of all drug policy.

Various international commitments and legal instruments form an important basis for the work with strengthening human rights in drug policy. It is time to increase our efforts to implement what we already have agreed.

Human Rights Challenges in Sweden in addressing and countering all aspects of the world drug problem

In Sweden, drug policy is part of public health policy. The public health-based orientation is the basis for the national drug policy. The public health

policy has a clear focus on equitable health with an overarching objective of

eliminating avoidable health inequalities within one generation. Equity in health is a guiding principle that applies to everyone, both children and young people as well as women and men with problematic use or drug use disorder. Drug prevention includes crime prevention and law enforcement which is an integral part of the drug policy. Based on this general approach, Sweden would like to share information about how challenges relating to human rights in drugs policy are currently addressed within different areas by the Government of Sweden.

Equal access to care and support

* Care and support for people with drug use disorders in the world needs to be improved. In Sweden, a national inquiry on drugs have been appointed to analyse and propose measures that can ensure good, equitable quality based on the needs and experiences of users and patients.[[1]](#footnote-1) The inquiry will also propose whether – and, if so, how – care and support measures can be offered in a more systematic way to those convicted of minor drug offences. Furthermore, the inquiry is also tasked to identify care and support measures offered within the framework of The Swedish National Board of Institutional Care and the Swedish Prison and Probation Service’s operations as well as to propose measures to strengthen cooperation between healthcare services, the Swedish Police Authority and social services to ensure that women and men with harmful use or dependence receive adequate assistance.
* Women often have more co-occurring substance use and mental health problems than men, and people with comorbid substance use and mental health problems still do not receive adequate care and support. In Sweden, we are analysing a proposal that regional health care providers shall be responsible for all treatment of drug use disorder and that the provision of treatment for drug use disorder should be coordinated with treatment for other psychiatric conditions.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Safety and protection and efficient law enforcement

* For the right to safety and well-being of individuals and of society as a whole, it is vital to protect people in vulnerable situations, including people with drug problems, from exploitation by organised crime groups and encounter drug-related organised crime. This work must respect international law, including drug control conventions. Human rights have to be respected when countering drug-related crime including violence, trafficking och corruption. The principles of legality, and proportionality between criminal offences and penalties must be respected. The law enforcement must be efficient and built on global commitment and cooperation.

Reducing harms from drugs

* The provision of different measures for harm reduction, such as opioid agonist treatment (OAT), needle and syringe programmes (NSP) and take home naloxone has increased in Sweden, but there is still room for improvement. The National Board of Health and Welfare and the Swedish Medical Product Agency have been appointed to support measures to improve access to take home naloxone. The national inquiry on drugs will analyse and propose needed changes in legislation to take further steps in improving access to naloxone in society.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Social support and housing first

* There are still challenges with providing social support to people with drug use disorder, including housing and other basic services. Sweden’s strategy against homelessness is promoting Housing First, which is a homeless assistance approach that prioritizes providing permanent housing to women and men experiencing homelessness.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Preventing drug induced deaths

* Sweden has a zero vision for drug related mortalities, which means that objective is that no one should die as a result of pharmaceutical and drug poisoning. Preventing overdose deaths requires a better understanding of the similarities and differences in the ways in which overdoses occur among women and men, including the differences between intentional and unintentional overdose. We are working to promote use and availability of naloxone and has established a warning system for drug related deaths at the Public Health Agency of Sweden.[[5]](#footnote-5) To reduce drug induced deaths, more efforts are however needed. The national inquiry on drugs in Sweden shall propose a national programme to reduce the number of deaths due to drug poisoning.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Increased user influence in care and support

* To design and implement relevant and appropriate services for drug dependence, a respectful and open dialogue and listening to the people who use drugs is key. This is an important area that needs further attention. Sweden is working in different ways to promote an increased user influence in treatment services. It is important that the follow-up of results has a holistic approach that reflects what patients and users think is important.

Reduce stigma and discrimination

* Studies show that people who use drugs can experience stigma, social marginalization, and discrimination. This needs to be addressed in Sweden, a national inquiry is assigned to propose measures to ensure that people with harmful use and dependence do not experience stigmatisation in their contact with social services and healthcare, resulting in them choosing not to seek care and support.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Gender equality at the core of drug policy

* Special attention needs to be paid to women’s needs and situation in the drug area. The UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) has emphasised in World Drug Report 2022 that there are continued gaps in the availability of drug treatments, especially for women. In Sweden, the National Board of Health and Welfare has been appointed to analyse the care provided for girls and women with substance use disorders, to ensure that the care is suited to the needs of women. Women need to be involved in all stages of the development, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of drug policies and programmes.
* As LGBTI-persons run a greater risk of developing harmful use and dependence, it is important to ensure that substance use care services are adapted to meet their specific needs.

Protect children from drugs

* Children and young people in Sweden, like in the rest of the world, run a greater risk of harms from drugs. Using drugs at younger ages is especially associated with increased risks for ill-health, injuries and death. It is therefore of particular importance to protect children and young people from using drugs or developing a problematic use or dependence. Demand reduction measures targeted at this group is essential. Such measures also need to be gender-responsive. In Sweden, a national inquiry on drugs will present a specific programme for preventing drug use among children and young people and analysing whether special care and support activities should be designed for children and young people.[[8]](#footnote-8)
* Children and young people in Sweden who grow up in families with harmful use or addiction run a higher risk than other children of developing harmful use or addiction and mental illness themselves. Children also need to be protected from negative consequences caused by others’ harmful drug use. Children to people who use drugs do not always receive attention or support focused on their situation and needs. In Sweden, The National Board of Health and Welfare has been appointed to support municipalities and regions to pay attention and provide support to children of people who use drugs.[[9]](#footnote-9)
* We also need to prevent the use of children in the illicit production of and trafficking of narcotic drugs.

Civil society - important defenders of human rights

* Civil society plays a key role in promoting human rights in drug policy. In Sweden, we had open dialogue with civil society organizations to receive their input to the drafting of the Swedish strategy on alcohol, narcotics, doping, tobacco and gambling.

Access to internationally controlled substances for medical and scientific purposes

* Sweden would like to highlight the rising difficulties in affirming access to internationally controlled substances for medical purposes, including for palliative care and emergency medical care, due to medicine shortages, which in particular risks the health of older persons.

1. <https://www.sou.gov.se/pagaende-utredningar/socialdepartementet/2022/03/s-2022012/about-us-in-english/> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. [Från delar till helhet - Regeringen.se](https://www.regeringen.se/rattsliga-dokument/statens-offentliga-utredningar/2023/01/sou-20235/) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <https://www.sou.gov.se/pagaende-utredningar/socialdepartementet/2022/03/s-2022012/about-us-in-english/> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. [Nationell hemlöshetsstrategi ska motverka hemlöshet - Regeringen.se](https://www.regeringen.se/artiklar/2022/10/---regeringen-beslutar-om-en-nationell-hemloshetsstrategi/) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. <https://www.folkhalsomyndigheten.se/livsvillkor-levnadsvanor/andts/vad-vi-gor-inom-andts/narkotika-och-halsofarliga-varor/varningssystem-narkotika/> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. <https://www.sou.gov.se/pagaende-utredningar/socialdepartementet/2022/03/s-2022012/about-us-in-english/> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. <https://www.sou.gov.se/pagaende-utredningar/socialdepartementet/2022/03/s-2022012/about-us-in-english/> [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. <https://www.sou.gov.se/pagaende-utredningar/socialdepartementet/2022/03/s-2022012/about-us-in-english/> [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. [Barn som anhöriga | Nationellt kompetenscentrum anhöriga (anhoriga.se)](https://anhoriga.se/barnsomanhoriga) [↑](#footnote-ref-9)