

Cambodia joins in the crackdown on drug use

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Dr Vic Salas looks on as United Nations Secretary General, Ban Ki-moon hands a dose of methadone to a patient in Cambodia's first methadone clinic in Phnom Penh.

OST (Methadone) in Cambodia first started in 2010, in a pilot project run by the Health Ministry (MOH) at the Khmer-Soviet Friendship Hospital in Phnom Penh and supported by WHO, UNAIDS the Australian government, and the GFATM. Despite a high profile launch and a visit to the facility by the UN Secretary General in its first year, the only clinic in the country has struggled to attract regular clients, and has never had over 150 people at any one time, while estimates of PWIDs who inject on a regular basis in Cambodia could be at least 8 to 10 times that number. Since Australian support ended in 2014, the MOH has been in charge of methadone procurement. Methadone is still not available on a wider basis to all those who want or need it; there needs to be more flexibility around opening hours, and considerations for more take-out doses for clients who are more stable, reducing the need to visit the facility daily. NGOs working with drug users say that more support services are needed—for example, access to vocational training, jobs, and housing and transportation support.

In 2017, the Cambodian government launched a campaign to crack down further on drug use, and in the first two months of the year over 5000 people have been arrested, for using, pushing or manufacturing illegal drugs. This unprecedented scale of police action has led to a strain on the courts and on the prison system, which are now at breaking point. The lack of good quality rehabilitation facilities, and the continued use of compulsory detention centers in the country can only exacerbate the existing problems. There are also unconfirmed reports that the number of regular clients at OST facilities has dropped, which may be due to the

crackdown. The government, however has also sought assistance from donors, such as China, in building rehabilitation facilities, and has rejected comparisons with the “war on drugs” approach and the killings being carried out in the Philippines under President Rodrigo Duterte.

And the Philippines OST doesn't exist...

The Philippines has not even considered piloting opiate substitution programs, and unlike Cambodia, has had a very small scale, on-again, off-again implementation of NSPs in some cities in the south. HIV rates among PWID in the Philippines are approaching 70% while those in Cambodia are less than half that.

In the Philippines, some legislators in the new Senate, particularly Senator Risa Hontiveros, are taking a lead in crafting policy that will promote a health and harm reduction approach to drug use, compared to the current and insufficient law enforcement approaches. The 1998 AIDS law, considered forward looking in its time, is also under review, to ensure that current evidence around drug use, HIV prevention, and effective rehabilitation for people who use drugs translates into effective policies and projects.

Reference: <http://www.phnompenhpost.com/post-weekend/drug-crackdown-pushes-courts-and-prisons-breaking-point>

<http://www.rappler.com/thought-leaders/156057-drugs-101-ph-drug-situation>