

# **In defence of decriminalisation:**

## **What our advocacy successes and failures tell us**

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- A global network of 191 NGOs from 70+ countries
- Working to amplify and strengthen a diverse global movement to repair the harms caused by punitive drug policies and promote just responses
- Facilitating civil society engagement in drug policy debates

# Outline

## What we did well:

- Strong, sustained advocacy for decriminalisation
- Trend towards decriminalisation around the world and the growing global and UN consensus

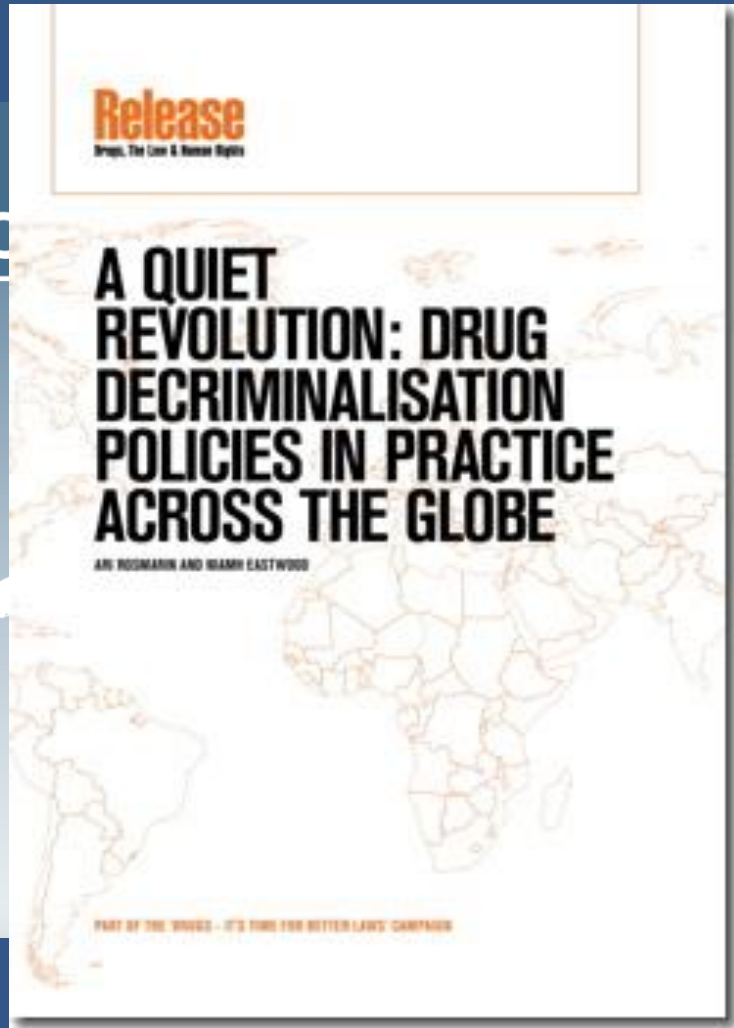
## The evolution of our messaging:

- The ‘gold standard’
- Greater technical detail & capacity strengthening

## What we can do better:

- Articulate “decriminalisation 2.0” in a deepening crisis of prohibition & failure of capitalism
- Reframing narratives & resistance

## Looking back – our advocacy



- The failure and harms of criminalization (strongly linked to HIV/AIDS advocacy)
- Establish that decriminalization was permissible under the UN drug treaties
- With government interest we had to get more technical on details
- Started tracking developments
- Consider our position as a network & strengthen capacity through workshops and training-of-trainers



# Global support for Ending Criminal Sanctions for Personal Possession / Use



# UN support for decriminalisation

- UN System Common Positions
  - on drugs (2018)



**UN Chief Executives Board (CEB) made up of 31 UN entities support the UN Common Position on drugs**

# And UNODC??



**UNODC**

United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime

## **Briefing paper: Decriminalisation of Drug Use and Possession for Personal Consumption**

Decriminalising drug use and possession for personal consumption is permitted by the international drug control conventions and is a key element of the HIV response among people who use drugs

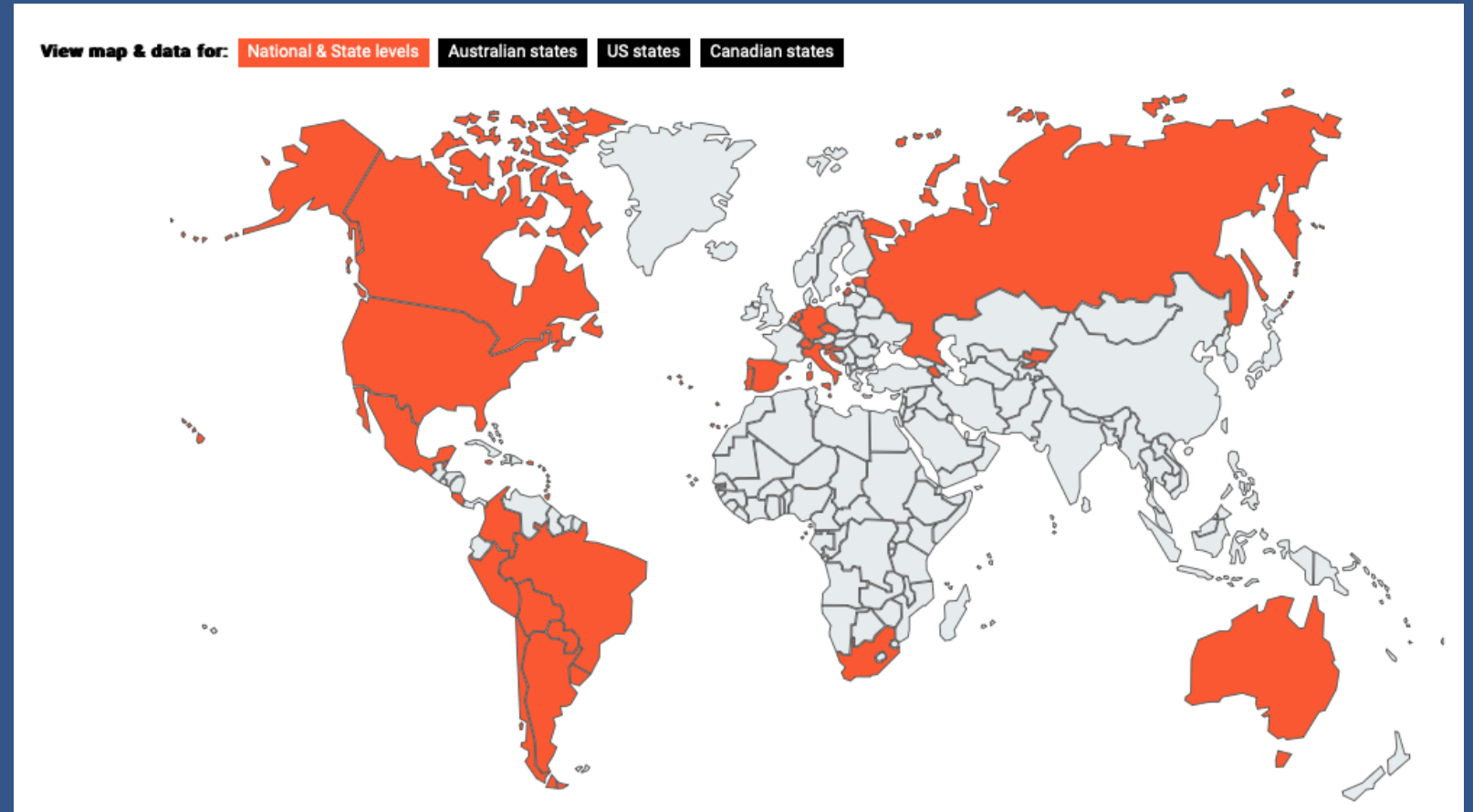
This document clarifies the position of UNODC to inform country responses to promote a health and human rights-based approach to drug policy. It explains that decriminalising drug use and possession for personal consumption is consistent with international drug control conventions and may be required to meet obligations under international human rights law.

### **Terms and definitions<sup>1</sup>**

Decriminalisation of drug use for non-medical purposes and possession for personal consumption can be as a matter of law ("de jure") and as a matter of practice or policy ("de facto"). De jure decriminalisation is the removal of criminal sanctions with the optional use of civil or administrative sanctions, such as fines or education. De facto decriminalisation (sometimes called depenalisation) is the decision in practice or as policy to not apply criminal or administrative penalties for certain offenses. In de jure decriminalisation models, personal possession and use remain unlawful, but are not criminal. In de facto decriminalisation models, personal possession and use remain criminal but may be addressed with alternative sanctions for offenders who are drug dependent or have committed minor crimes.

## More and more countries are moving towards decriminalisation...

- 59 jurisdictions in 39 countries have decriminalised
- Half of these reforms took place in the past 10 years!





# THE GOLD STANDARD OF DECRIMINALISATION

IDPC's gold standard of decriminalisation is the removal of all sanctions for drug use and related activities, including possession, acquisition, purchase, cultivation and possession of drug use paraphernalia. An increasing number of governments, the United Nations, civil society groups, networks of people who use drugs and academics around the world have acknowledged the urgent need for decriminalisation.

## 1. Don't punish

**Remove all sanctions for drug use and related activities, for all substances**



## 2. Support

**Promote voluntary access to systems of care and support**



## 3. Community engagement

**Meaningfully involve people who use drugs in design and monitoring**



## 4. Redress

**Expunge previous convictions and develop reparations for affected communities**



## 5. Compliance

**Comprehensively train authorities to ensure implementation and adherence**



## 6. Health & rights

**Redirect resources away from punitive systems towards rights-affirming services**



This infographic was developed by the International Drug Policy Consortium (IDPC) based on the Drug Decriminalisation [e]Course and Decriminalisation of people who use drugs: A guide for advocacy, user-friendly resources for people from all sectors who wish to understand the key objectives, principles and concepts relating to decriminalisation of drug use and how to advocate for it. You can find the [e]Course, the Guide, and more information and useful materials on decriminalisation, at [www.idpc.net/decriminalisation](http://www.idpc.net/decriminalisation)

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## Community engagement

fully

d  
g

## rights

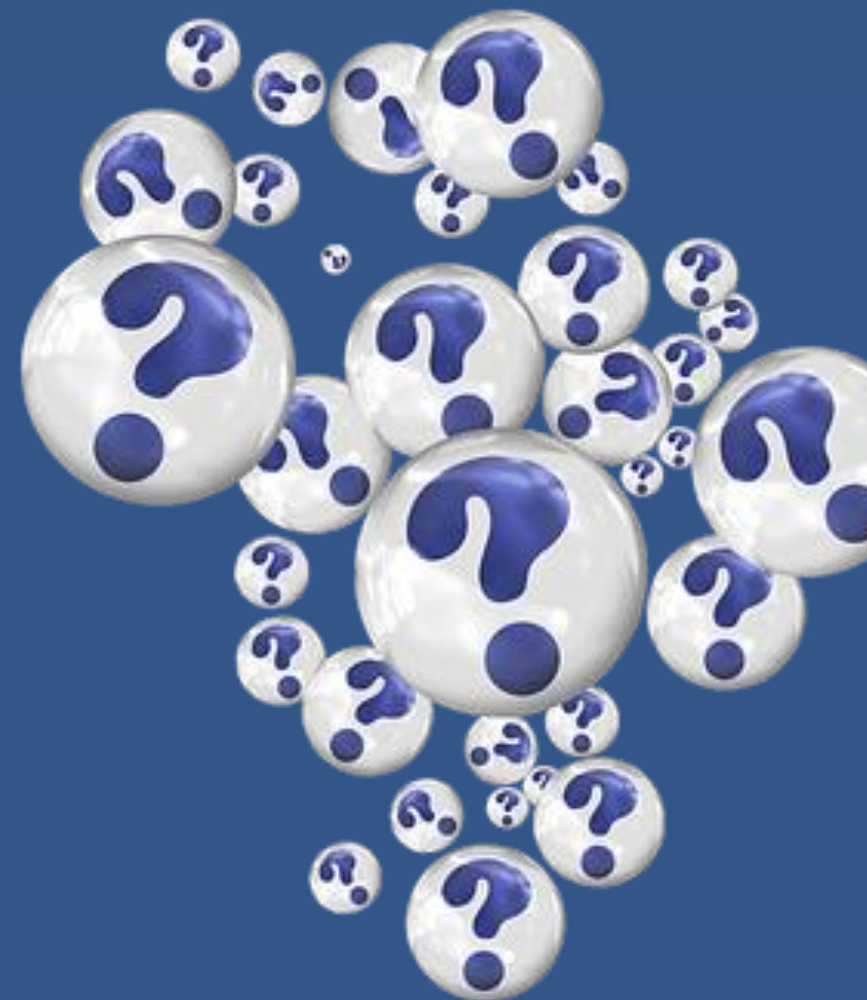
resources away from punitive



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## How does decriminalisation work?

- What drugs are decriminalised?
  - All drugs!
- What activities are decriminalised?
  - Possession
  - Cultivation
  - Possession of drug use paraphernalia
  - Social sharing
- How do we know if possession is for personal use?
  - Thresholds must only be indicative – developed with people who use drugs
- Who makes that decision?
  - Complex - but in a no sanctions model police have the discretion to leave people alone unless another crime is suspected





# A deepening crisis of prohibition

Credit: Juan Fernández Ochoa

## North America's Drug deaths catastrophe

**United states:**  
**>109,000 deaths in 2022**  
(total)



**Canada:**  
**7,328 deaths in 2022**  
(opioid-related)



## Heightened risks to Blood-borne viruses



**Global prevalence among  
people who inject drugs**

**People who use drugs living with:**  
**Hepatitis C: 6.6 million (+14%)**  
**HIV: 1.6 million (+17%)**

(WDR 2023 | % increase from WDR2019 data)

## Unmet agreements International norms & guidance

Housing, food,  
clothing, care...

~Universal  
HR Declaration

Decriminalisation  
Harm reduction

~UNGASS2016  
~HR & DP Guidelines

Treatment

~UN Common  
Position on Drugs

Community  
leadership

~WHO 'Comprehensive  
package'

Traditional  
medicines

~OHCHR reports

+ etc!

~Global AIDS Strategy

~UNDRIP

**No more  
prisons**

**Reparations**

**Safe  
supply**

**Drug  
consumption  
rooms**

**Clear demands**

from communities, civil society, academia

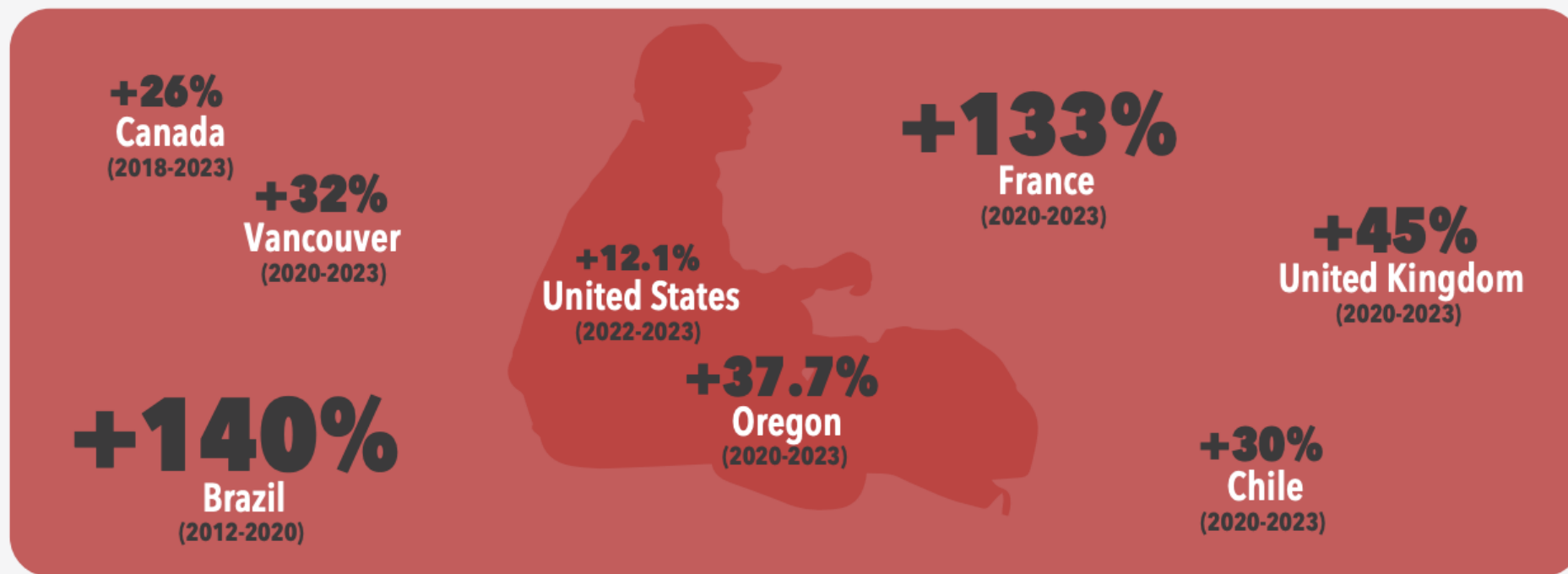
Source: 'Off Track',  
IDPC shadow report,  
December 2023



# Backlash & scapegoating

## THE HOMELESSNESS CRISIS ACROSS THE WORLD <sup>273,274,275,276,277,278,279,280</sup>

*The number of homeless people worldwide continues to rise, both in countries that have decriminalized drugs and those with strict criminalization policies. Decriminalization of drugs isn't the cause of the housing crisis; criminalization of drugs won't solve it either. The real cause of the housing crisis lies in housing policies and inequality, not drug policy reform. Without housing, people lack private space to use drugs.*



Source: GCDP 2024

Overview
Section 1: Singapore's Drug Control Strategy ▼
Section 2: The Impact of Drug Abuse on Families and Loved Ones ▼
Section 3: The Dangers of Drug Liberalisation ▲
Did you know? The history of Subutex in Singapore
San Francisco
Oregon
British Columbia
Thailand
Ecuador
Additional Readings

## Section 3: The Dangers of Drug Liberalisation

Singapore's drug control strategy focuses on reducing both supply and demand through a comprehensive harm prevention approach. This includes preventive drug education (PDE) to educate the community and strengthen resilience, alongside firm laws, enforcement, and intelligence-driven operations to prevent drug proliferation. Singapore also provides rehabilitation, and aftercare and supervision programmes for reintegration after release from Drug Rehabilitation Centres (DRCs).

Singapore's commitment to a strict, preventative approach extends to all drugs, including cannabis, due to the serious psychological and physical harm they can cause. While some global movements advocate for the legalisation and decriminalisation of drugs, Singapore prioritises harm prevention, believing it to be the most effective method for reducing drug-related harm and to safeguard the well-being and safety of its people. Countries that have legalised or decriminalised drugs have often seen rising violence, crime, and addiction rates, leading some to reconsider their policies.

To understand the broader global context, explore the sidebars to discover the outcomes of various drug policies around the world.

DID YOU KNOW? THE HISTORY OF SUBUTEX IN SINGAPORE



SAN FRANCISCO



OREGON



BRITISH COLUMBIA



Source:

Central Narcotics Bureau, Singapore

<https://www.cnb.gov.sg/drug-victims-remembrance-day/the-dangers-of-drug-liberalisation>

## Reclarifying the objectives and impact of decriminalisation

- What a decriminalisation policy can address:
  - Stigma and discrimination
  - Improve access to health, harm reduction and drug treatment (alongside adequate funding)
  - Reduce interactions with police and the criminal legal system
- What decriminalisation will not fix:
  - A toxic drug supply
  - A housing crisis!!!
  - Underlying structural issues of inequality, poverty, gender and racial discrimination, the damaging legacy of colonialism, the failure of capitalism

## What we need to do now

- WE SHOULD NOT BE ON THE DEFENSIVE! (title of my presentation!)
- Decriminalisation works and we must be very clear on what it can deliver and what it will not address.
- Be clear about who and what has caused the crisis of an UNREGULATED and toxic drug supply.
- Decrim cannot be the scapegoat for over a century of prohibition that drives drug markets in ever more harmful directions.
- We need decrim – this is a red line BUT we need so much more.
- We need to advocate for drug consumption / safe injection sites, drug checking, safer supply and legal regulation alongside housing, employment, education and addressing structural inequality.
- Be in solidarity within our sector across the global and across other sister movements!!



# Resources on decriminalisation

- Interactive map
- Advocacy guide on decriminalisation
- Briefing on decriminalisation
- Drug decriminalisation e-course:  
<https://idpc.healthfoundation.eu>

HEALTH [e] FOUNDATION



My courses

App Guides ▾

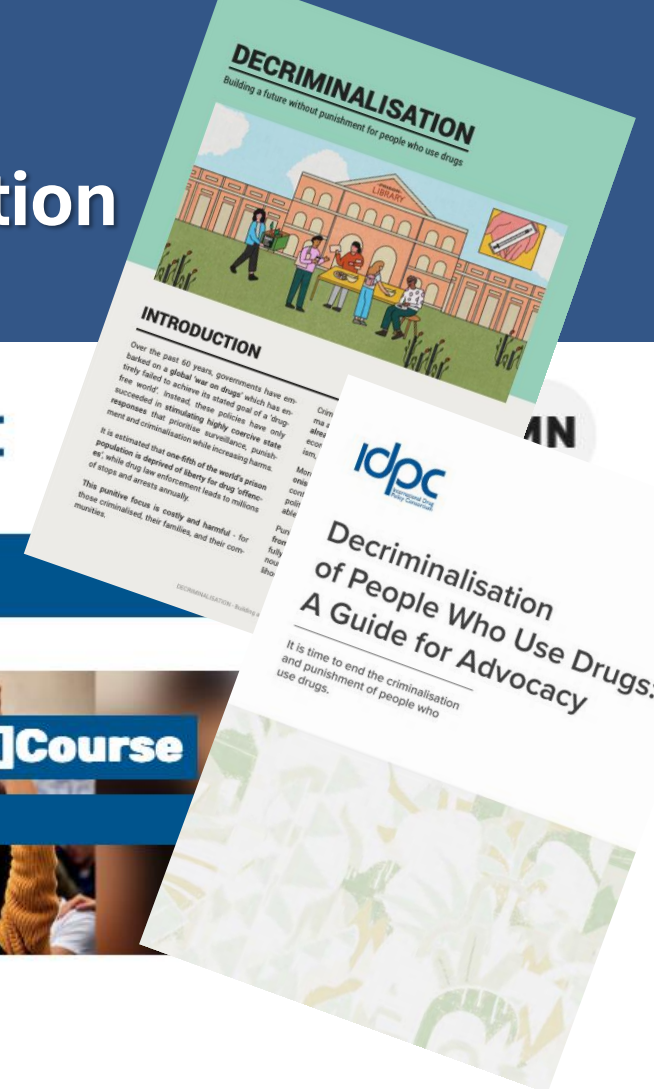
## Drug Decriminalisation [e]Course

Drug use should not be a crime

DRUG DECRIMINALISATION [E]COURSE

## Welcome

Welcome to the Drug Decriminalisation [e]Course! Across seven interactive, engaging modules, the Drug Decriminalisation [e]Course course will provide you with videos, exercises, and key information that will equip you to help move the world towards decriminalisation and away from the war on drugs. For more information on this course, please watch the following video.





# Thank you!

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[www.idpc.net](http://www.idpc.net)