

The contribution of
harm reduction
towards the
Sustainable
Development Goals

Colophon

Title: The Contribution of Harm Reduction towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

Key words: SDGs, harm reduction, people who use drugs, good health and wellbeing

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June - 2018

Course code: AM_471123

This internship report was established in cooperation with the Athena Science Shop.

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Summary

Introduction: The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are a collection of seventeen interrelated goals and 169 corresponding targets set out by the UN at the end of 2015. The SDGs aim to promote and coordinate the implementation of internationally agreed development. Currently, the SDGs are of substantial importance in achieving sustainable development worldwide and all countries within the UN agreed on contributing towards these goals.

Harm reduction for people who use drugs (PWUD) is an evidence-based approach to improve the health and quality of life of PWUD, and is a legitimate alternative to abstinence for people who are unable or not willing to abstain from drug use. Contrary to drug abstinence, harm reduction focuses on the prevention of harm, rather than on the prevention of drug use itself. Harm reduction is not mentioned explicitly in the SDGs, while abstinence is. Currently, the importance of harm reduction is not always acknowledged by local governments and other funders. The aim of this study was to understand whether 'harm reduction' contributes to the SDGs, and if so, in which way. Therefore, this study explored perceptions about the relation between harm reduction and the SDGs, as perceived by organizations involved with harm reduction or drug policy.

Methods: this study uses a mixed-methods approach, which includes a quantitative and qualitative study. For the quantitative part, an online survey was sent out to organizations actively working in the fields of harm reduction and/or drug policy. Respondents were asked which SDGs and targets are connected to harm reduction and had to rank the SDGs on a scale from 1 to 5 (1: not at all relevant and five: extremely relevant). In total, 85 respondents completed the survey. Subsequently, a qualitative study was done. Survey respondents were invited to participate in an interview, of which nine respondents from various parts of the world participated in semi-structured interviews. These interviews were conducted to explore in more depth how harm reduction specifically contributes to the targets that were mentioned as relevant by the same respondents.

For the quantitative analysis, all survey results were exported to Microsoft Excel where an overview was made of the SDGs that were indicated as relevant by the majority of the respondents. This gave an overview on how many respondents indicated specific targets as relevant and what the average ranking was of the SDGs. The SDGs indicated as relevant by more than 50% of the survey respondents and the SDGs ranked with a 2,5 or higher were then discussed in more depth.

Results: While harm reduction is not incorporated in the SDGs, most of the survey participants indicated multiple connections between harm reduction and various SDGs. The following SDGs were seen to be most closely connected to harm reduction: SDG 1 '*No poverty*', 3 '*Good health and wellbeing*', 5 '*Gender equality*', 10 '*Reduced inequalities*' and 16 '*Peace, justice and strong institutions*'. Respectively these SDGs were indicated as relevant by 87,1%, 59,6%, 58,5%, 51,5%, and 51,5% of the respondents, receiving a ranking between 3,18 and 4,46. In addition, also SDG 4 '*Quality education*', 8 '*Decent work and economic growth*', 11 '*Sustainable cities*

and communities' and 17 '*Partnerships for the goals*', were seen as relevant, receiving a ranking of 2,5 or higher. Interventions were especially mentioned to reduce the harm for PWUD, but also interventions to reduce harm for others, such as family members, was mentioned.

SDG 3 '*Good health and wellbeing*', and mainly the aspect of preventing and treating HIV/AIDS among PWUD, was found to be the most relevant and most accepted SDG in relation to harm reduction. According to the respondents, interventions promoting good health and wellbeing are necessary when reducing harm for PWUD. Harm reduction can contribute to this SDG in terms of preventing and treating HIV, Hepatitis, and reproductive health related issues, but also by preventing and treating non-communicable diseases, such as mental health issues.

For the remaining SDGs, harm reduction approaches were mentioned as well. Examples are providing special harm reduction services for women who use drugs (SDG 5), including developing countries in drug policy decision-making (SDG 10) and providing work for PWUD in order to contribute to society (SDG 8).

Discussion/conclusion: The most obvious connection between harm reduction and the SDGs is the connection with SDG 3, '*good health and wellbeing*'. The improvement of health, and particularly the prevention and treatment of infectious diseases, is the most obvious and well-known relation with harm reduction. For the most part, scientific literature primarily focuses on health-related harm reduction interventions. Only very limited publications on harm reduction programs other than health related subjects are available. However, the participants in this study indicated many other connections with the SDGs, indicating that harm reduction is much broader than only health related interventions. Based on this study, we can conclude that harm reduction definitely contributes towards various SDGs, including: 1 '*No poverty*', 3 '*Good health and wellbeing*', 4 '*Quality education*', 5 '*Gender equality*', 8 '*Decent work and economic growth*', 10 '*Reduced inequalities*', 11 '*Sustainable cities and communities*', 16 '*Peace, justice and strong institutions*', and 17 '*Partnerships for the goals*'.

Overall, this study points out the importance and broadness of harm reduction programs and its various contributions to the SDGs. Harm reduction is certainly of added value for many of the targets. Therefore, harm reduction programs should be promoted, applied and accepted more widely in society. In that way, it can contribute to achieving sustainable development worldwide.