

TNI advocates harm reduction principles in Kachin State

In early 2013, TNI assisted Metta Foundation in developing an awareness leaflet on 'Drug Abuse and Addiction' for distribution in Kachin State, which is facing serious heroin epidemic among young people, both male and female. Most of them are injecting drugs users. Unsafe practice including sharing needles is also one of the major drivers of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in Kachin State. The quality and quantity of the responses to the IDU heroin epidemic have been minimal. TNI advocated to include awareness on harm reduction principles in the leaflet including needle exchange programmes and methadone maintenance treatment. The leaflet was published in English, Burmese and Kachin languages.

The majority of Kachin State is inhabited by Kachin Christians (mostly Baptists but also some Catholics and Anglicans) and a minority Shan Buddhist population. Community leaders – including religious as well as in the education sector – tend to be conservative, and their opposition to some harm reduction projects, such as the needle exchange programme at Myitkyina university, and tend to favour abstinence-based projects.

TNI therefore also supported the 'Drug Abuse and Addiction Awareness Forum' that was organized by Metta Foundation in Kachin State capital Myitkyina on 8 and 9 February 2013. The forum was attended by 600 people, including representatives from government agencies, high schools and Myitkyina University, Christian and Buddhist religious leaders and youth. Speakers included the Kachin State Chief Minister, representatives from the Kachin State government, the Attorney General's Office, the Central Committee for Drugs Abuse Control, and religious leaders. TNI invited local staff from the Burnett Institute and the Asia Harm Reduction Network (AHRN) to speak at the forum to promote more space for harm reduction interventions in Kachin State. The next day workshops were given to Kachin and Shan community groups from Myitkyina and Waingmaw Townships on harm reduction interventions.

TNI advocated with the Forum organisers to continue a policy dialogue in Kachin State with government officials but especially with community leaders to promote harm reduction interventions and to seek ways to scale up quality and quantity of services for drug users. TNI will take a lead in following up on this later in 2013, in cooperation with Metta Foundation, Burnett Institute, Asia Harm Reduction Network (AHRN), Medicins du Monde and key local organisations working in the issue.