

WE ARE SOMEBODY

.drug.user.liberation.movement.



From
The
MASSROOTS



From A Song of Hope by Bud Osborn

**You can criminalize our pain
Pulverize our human rights
Dehumanize us with charity
But we are somebody**

**You can terrorize with hate
Demonize with lies
Lock us up
Tear us down
Try to drive us outta town
But we are somebody**

We are a strong and revolutionary community

**And no one can be the human beings they oughta be
If we aren't the human beings we oughta be**

Nobody can be anybody all by themselves

**So whether others deny it
Or whether we embrace it
We are each others brothers and sisters
We are each others only chance
For a life in common and real beauty
We are all each other has
We are all somebody.**

bud_osborn

What is this?

THIS IS A MINI-MANUAL FOR DRUG USER ORGANIZING - A TOOL FOR FLEDGELING AND ESTABLISHED DRUG USER GROUPS. IT PROVIDES WORKSHOPS, ACTIVITIES AND OTHER TOOLS TO HELP GROUPS DEVELOP A VISION OF LIBERATION, GRASSROOTS DEMOCRATIC PRACTICES, AND A STRATEGY FOR ACTION.

Who are we?

WE'RE A GROUP OF PEOPLE WITH EXPERIENCE BUILDING GRASSROOTS ORGANIZATIONS OF PEOPLE WHO USE DRUGS. MOST OF US HAVE LIVED OR LIVING EXPERIENCE. WE THINK THAT THE DRUG USER MOVEMENT IS AT A CROSSROAD. PEOPLE WHO USE DRUGS CONTINUE TO FACE REPRESSION - CRIMINALIZATION, STIGMA, VIOLENCE, SURVEILLANCE, HARRASSMENT AND INCARCERATION. BUT THE MOVEMENT AND ORGANIZATIONS WE'VE DEVELOPED TO FIGHT BACK AGAINST THIS REPRESSION NOW ALSO FACE COOPTATION - FAKE & TOKENISTIC 'REPRESENTATION' AT GOVERNMENT TABLES, EXPLOITATIVE 'PEER WORK' IN HUGE NON-PROFITS AND NGO'S THAT MAKE MONEY FOR MANAGING OUT POVERTY, AND FUNDING FOR DRUG USER ORGANIZATIONS ON THE CONDITION THAT WE FIT THE MOLD OF BULLSHIT NGOS AND WORK WITHIN THE BORDERS THEY SET. FACED WITH THIS TWO PRONGED ATTACK BY THE SYSTEM, NOW IS THE TIME TO BE CLEAR THAT THE ROAD TO LIBERATION REQUIRES A GRASSROOTS, AUTONOMOUS, AND SOCIAL JUSTICE ORIENTED DRUG USER MOVEMENT. THIS BOOK IS OUR CONTRIBUTION TO BUILDING THIS MOVEMENT.

How do i use this?

READ THROUGH THE BOOK AND CHECK OUT THE WORKSHOP DESCRIPTIONS AND OTHER RESOURCES. WHEN YOU ARE READY, PLAN OUT SOME MEETINGS WITH YOUR GROUP. THIS BOOK CONTAINS 4 WORKSHOPS, EACH ONE ABOUT AN HOUR LONG.



A LIBERATION MOVEMENT IS WHEN A GROUP OF OPPRESSED PEOPLE COME TOGETHER TO FIGHT BACK, OVERTHROW THE SYSTEM THAT HAS BEEN OPPRESSING THEM, AND BUILD SOMETHING BETTER IN ITS PLACE

PRINCIPLES OF A LIBERATION ORIENTED DRUG USER MOVEMENT:



ALL OF US OR NONE.

Prioritize leadership of people who use drugs.

Put the interests of the most oppressed at the centre of the movement.

Solidarity with other groups of oppressed people.

No justice on stolen native land. Solidarity with Indigenous struggles.

"We're not tryna be some bullshit NGO."

Intersectionality, inclusion, fellowship.

Drug users are not the problem, the system is the problem.

**KANDU 24-7 PEER
SUPPORT HELPLINE**

**KANDU
KANDU
KANDU**

WE ARE HERE TO HELP WITH:

MENTAL HEALTH AND SUBSTANCE USE

O.A.T / I.O.A.T CLINICS

DRUG CHECKING & ANALYSIS

HOUSING AND SHELTERS

FOOD, HYGIENE, WELLNESS
CHECKS, OUTREACH.

AND SO MUCH MORE.

778-594-1716

778-594-1716

778-594-1716



VANDU

VANCOUVER AREA NETWORK OF DRUG USERS
380 EAST HASTINGS STREET, VANCOUVER BC, CANADA V6A 2H4
Note Mailing Address: CHINATOWN PO BOX 88441, 418 Main St, Vancouver BC V6A 2H4
Phone: 604-683-6061 Fax: 604-683-6199
Email: vandu@vandu.org Web: www.vandu.org

**VANDU TUESDAY
GROUP
FIELD TRIP**

Join us as we go to court to support
the BC Association of People on
Methadone in their class action suit
to end clinic fees for methadone.

Sign up: 12:30

Leave VANDU @ 1pm

This will replace the regular Tuesday Group meeting.



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**Do you drink alcohol
that is not bought at a
liquor store?**

(mouthwash, rubbing alcohol, hand
sanitizer, swabs, Lysol)

**This MONDAY, July 11th
First DRINKERS' MEETING
AT VANDU**

Location: 380 E. Hastings St.

~ Sign-up at 10:30 am ~

~ Stipend provided ~

BC researcher will take anonymous notes at the
meeting for use in a report

WHAT DO YOU NEED TO START A GRASSROOTS DRUG USER ORGANIZATION?

- 1. At least two people willing to do regular work organizing, coordinating and facilitating the group.**
- 2. A space to meet.**
- 3. A simple poster to get the word out.**
- 4. An agenda for your first meeting - you can use the first workshop in this mini-manual!**
- 5. A little bit of money so that you can provide a small stipend to participants and/or a light meal at your meeting - the BC/Yukon Association of Drug War Survivors supports for drug user groups across the Province.**

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

Principles of popular education workshops for facilitators:

- **Be prepared: Have lots of flipchart paper and markers ready, be there on time, take a minute to take a few deep breaths and feel calm, set up chairs in a circle so that everyone can see everyone else.**
- **Read the workshop outlines in advance and have a vision of how its going to go.**
- **Each workshop starts with a quote that sets the tone. If you can, write out the quote on big paper for people to see as they come in.**
- **Be willing to listen and be respectful towards self and others.**
- **Share your own experiences and thoughts as part of the session, but don't dominate the discussion.**
- **Keep a speakers list and try to get everyone to participate, especially in the brainstorm and experience sharing sections.**
- **Write down what people say on the flipchart, this sends a signal to participants that they are being listened to and what they say matters & it will also give you a record of what was discussed at the end of the meeting.**
- **Wrap up sections by reminding people what was said and what the point of the activity was.**
- **End the session by re-emphasizing why we did this workshop, what was said and learned, and what the next step is.**

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

continued...



"Freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed."

Martin Luther King, Jr.



STRUCTURE OF THE WORKSHOPS:

- **There are four workshops in this book, each one is intended to be about a one hour session.**
- **Each workshop is divided into three parts: experiences, analysis and action. The first part is focused on drawing out participants experiences and previous knowledge. The second part is focused on building the groups analysis of the situation and theory of how to make social change. The third part of the workshop focuses on how to put this analysis and theory into practice, and how to move into action.**
- **Most of the activities in the book are meant to be participatory. This means that you will introduce the activity, give some ideas, and then ask the participants to share their thoughts and ideas.**
- **You will need to flipchart to run these workshops properly. Either use a flipchart stand or tape some large pieces of paper to the wall.**
- **Most of the workshops have text in "quotes". You can read this text as written, paraphrase in your own words, or just use it as a general guide.**
- **Do make sure you read through the workshops and think through how each exercise might play out, before you run it live. This won't prepare you for everything that might happen in your workshop, but it will help. The 'This Workshop' section on each workshop cover page will give you a good idea of what the objective of the session is.**
- **Remember that building a movement is a process, focus on building relationships within your group. Even if a workshop or an activity tanks, don't panic, you can move on, or come back to it. Focus on the long term goal of building an organization and a movement.**

DEFINITION-

CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE

/sivil ˈdisəˈbɛdɛəns/ (noun)

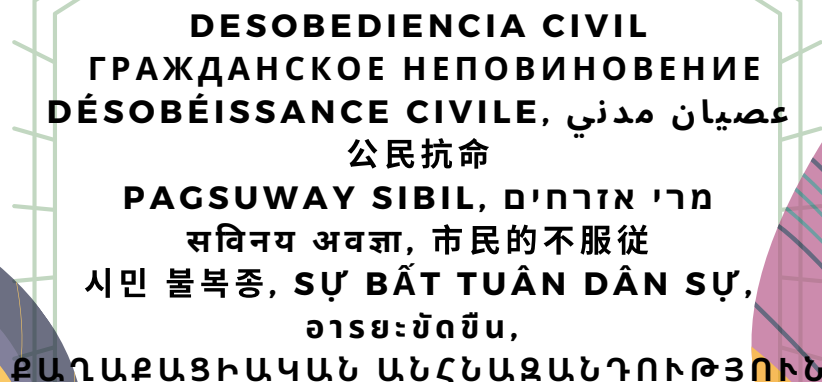
The widely held assumption that 'legal' equals 'moral' has created imbalances and inequities across our nation. The people whose lives are more greatly influenced by oppression are often painfully aware of the truth- that laws do not always serve the best interest for all. Recognizing the tendencies for laws to protect those with power, those who are subject to the ever common malfeasance of unjust laws have every right to speak out against and fight the disparities that put their lives at risk.

Civil disobedience can be defined as a refusal to obey and/or follow a law, a regulation or a power structure judged unjust or inequitable. Civil disobedience is typically peaceful non-violent actions.

At its roots, Civil disobedience is an act of resistance.

Harm reduction practices are often closely linked to civil disobedience. It was the brave actions of drug users who fought against the routine and unjustified persecution of people who use drugs. Civil disobedience also takes a stand against lateral violence. Within the drug user community it was not always the overt violence we suffer from authorities, but also a distinct lack of medical and social support that proved to be a rallying cry for activists to fight back and demand better.

In North America virtually every established harm reduction policy and practice adopted by multiple levels of government, the majority of medical experts and authorities, scholars and professionals carries the same origin. That origin is drug users demanding to be heard, marching and rallying, raising shit and educating the public.



DESOBEDIENCIA CIVIL
ГРАЖДАНСКОЕ НЕПОВИНОБЕНИЕ
DÉSOMBÉISSANCE CIVILE, عصيان مدني
公民抗命
PAGSUWAY SIBIL, מרי אזרחים
सविनय अवज्ञा, 市民的不服從
시민 불복종, SỰ BẤT TUÂN DÂN SỰ,
ទានធុះបំពើ, ԲԱՂԱՔԱՑԻԱԿԱՆ ԱՆՀՆԱԶԱՆԴՈՒԹՅՈՒՆ

1.0

THE WAR ON DRUGS IS A WAR ON US

Workshop outline

- **experiences of the drug war**
- **who wins and who loses in the war on drugs**
- **Vision - Strategy - Organization**



This workshop:

Encourages participants to understand that the war on drugs is no accident but a policy, with defined winners and losers, intended to prop up the current racist, colonial and capitalist system. the people who benefit from the drug war , directly and indirectly, are organized and powerful so we are going to have to be organized to fight back.

1.1

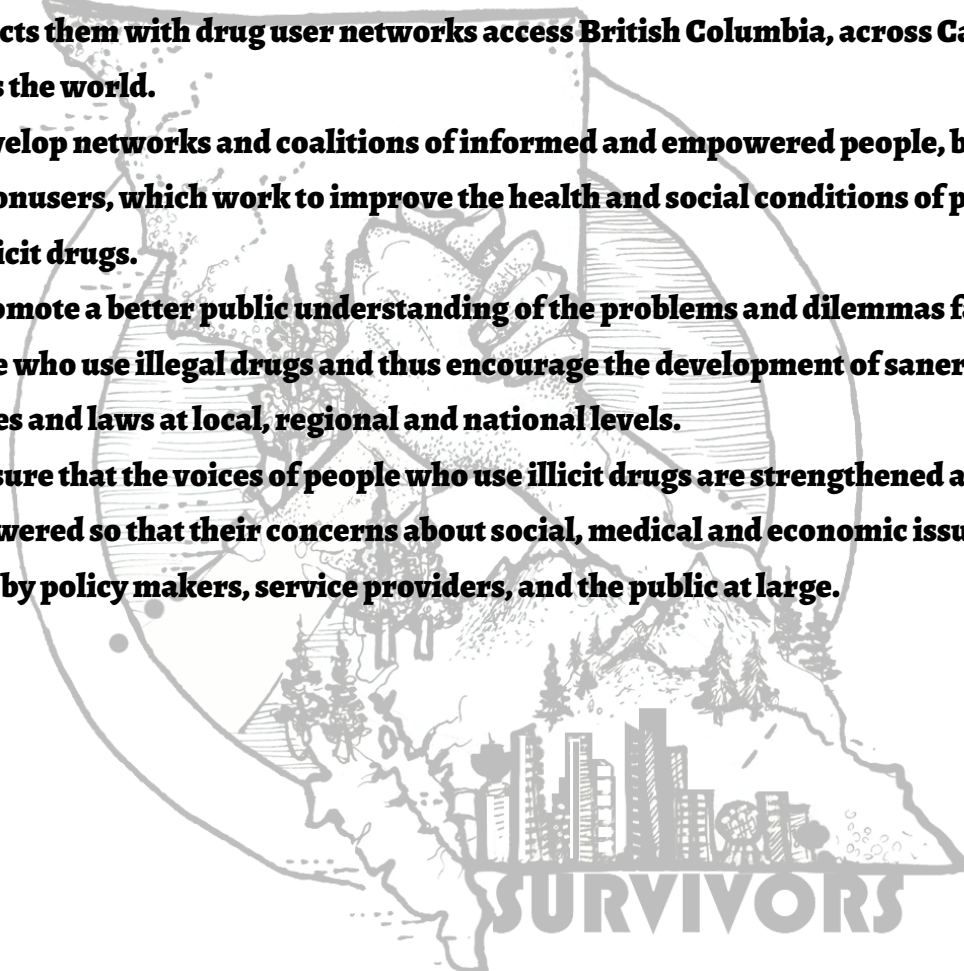
Experience

"Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will."

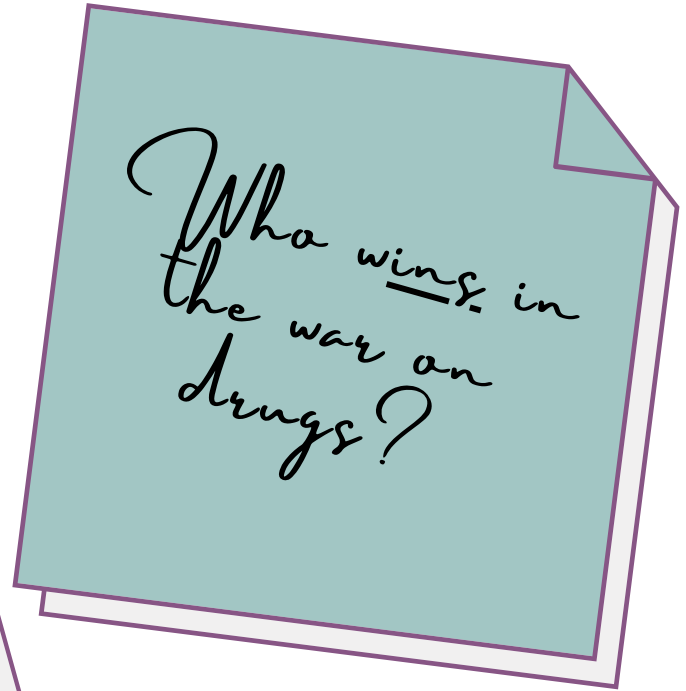
- **Acknowledgement of Indigenous Territory**
- **Mission Statement (you can use the BC/Yukon Association of Drug War Survivors Mission Statement if you don't have one yet).**
- **Read: "We know that the war on drugs hasn't decreased the amount of drugs produced globally, or the availability of drugs, or the number of people who use drugs; so why does the drug war continue?"**
- **Invite participants to give some responses, acknowledge, then read: "Its because the war on drugs is actually a war on us - away of criminalizing and controlling people and communities. It targets poor people, Indigenous people, communities of colour and other people and communities who are defined as 'a problem' by the system. It allows the police to surveil us, harrass us and criminalize us, and it feeds us into the prison industrial complex and the medical industrial complex that make money off their definition of our drug use as 'the problem'. How has the war on drugs affected your life? How does the war on drugs impact you on a day-to-day and week-to-week basis?"**
- **Write down participant responses on flipchart. Encourage all participants to share something. Use questions to draw out your participants if needed: "How do you have to change your behaviour everyday to avoid criminalization?" "How does being a drug user change your interactions with the health care system? With your doctor? With the hospital?" "How has being a drug user changed how you are seen in your community and how you see yourself?"**
- **Once these experiences are gathered and written down, wrap up and introduce the next activity, read: "So looking at those experiences, its really clear that this is a war on drug users. So lets go back to that question of why the drug war continues, and lets approach this question by asking 'Who benefits or profits from the war on drugs, and who pays the price?"**

The Purposes of the Association are:

- 1. To celebrate the strengths we have as people who use drugs that allow us to survive and resist the war on drugs.**
- 2. To realize, deepen and share the love, camaraderie, and wisdom found in drug user support groups.**
- 3. To empower people who currently use drugs deemed illegal to survive and to thrive, with their human rights respected and their voices heard.**
- 4. To improve the quality of life for people who use illicit drugs by developing and implementing educational programs and training events that ensure learning opportunities about safer drug use and harm reduction.**
- 5. To establish an inclusive social justice network for people who use drugs that encourages, supports and welcomes drug users from across British Columbia and connects them with drug user networks across British Columbia, across Canada, and across the world.**
- 6. To develop networks and coalitions of informed and empowered people, both users and nonusers, which work to improve the health and social conditions of people who use illicit drugs.**
- 7. To promote a better public understanding of the problems and dilemmas facing people who use illegal drugs and thus encourage the development of saner drug policies and laws at local, regional and national levels.**
- 8. To ensure that the voices of people who use illicit drugs are strengthened and empowered so that their concerns about social, medical and economic issues can be heard by policy makers, service providers, and the public at large.**



1.2 Analysis



- Set up two pieces of flipchart paper:

- Ask participants to brainstorm: who are the winners and who are the losers. Write down the winners and losers on the pieces of flipchart paper. Try to get everyone participating to make a suggestion of group of winners or losers.
- When a new group is mentioned by participants, ask them to explain why this group wins or loses in the war on drugs.
- You can use the chart on the following two pages to get an idea of how this exercise works
- If participants run out of ideas, get them to consider more options: "What about pharmaceutical companies? What about poor communities? What about Black and Indigenous people? What about Trans people? What about peasant coca and opium poppy producers in global South? What about the private companies that get contracts to build, manage and maintain prisons?"
- Wrap up question, read: "So what does this chart tell us about what we are up against in trying to end the war on drug users?"
- Answer: "The most powerful people and forces in our society use the drug war as a tool to secure their interest and wealth, and have an interest in it continuing. But the mass of people don't benefit from this war, so we have numbers on our side!"

WHO LOSES IN THE WAR ON DRUGS?

People who use illicit drugs

(most of all poor people who use illicit drugs)

- stigma and discrimination
- criminalization, violence and incarceration from the state
- violence from drug sellers
- drug related harms, illness and overdose

Poor People

- drugs used as excuse for police stops, checks and harassment
- cycling through remand, courts and jails on the basis of drug charges
- super-exploitation in criminalized drug industries to survive
- criminalized drug industry violence in poor communities

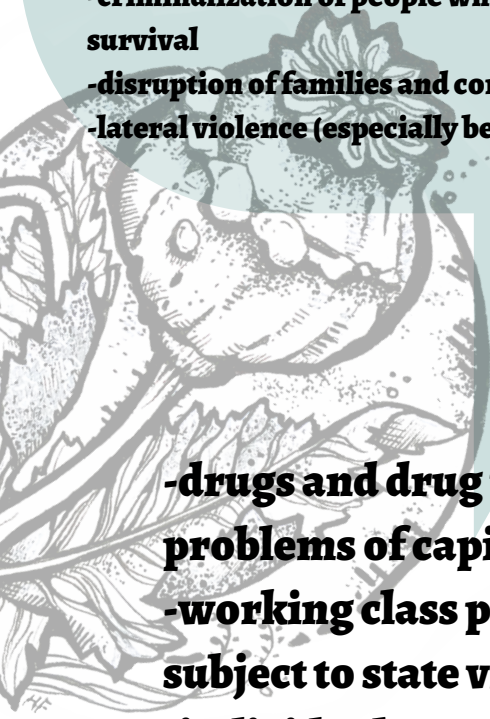
Indigenous, Black and other colonized people

- racism and racist drug war policies contribute to disproportionate criminalization & incarceration
- police occupation and violence of poor, especially black and Indigenous neighbourhoods
- illicit drugs to mask the pain and trauma of oppression and colonization instead of struggle and liberation to heal it
- social conflict and disruption of families and communities from addiction
- criminalization of people who work in the drug industry even though it's one of few economic options for survival
- disruption of families and communities by mass incarceration
- lateral violence (especially between youth) involved in the drug trade

The
Big
Picture!

The Working Class

- drugs and drug users scapegoated for real economic & social problems of capitalism and imperialism
- working class people are most likely to be criminalized, and subject to state violence because of their drug use
- individual use of illicit drugs can be used to mask the pain and alienation of capitalism but can also lead to problematic drug use and addiction
- exploitation of people working in the drug industry



WHO WINS IN THE WAR ON DRUGS?

Cops

- use drugs to justify occupation and criminalization of whole communities
- pad stats and justify budgets with drug arrests and cycling people who use drugs through the criminal injustice system
- scim off the top by stealing drugs and money from low-level dealers and users

The Government

- point to drugs and drug users to distract from the real economic and social issues of capitalism
- use drugs to justify the neoliberal containment state
- use drug war to use police to occupy communities of poor and colonized people
- justify funding 'soft' institutions of social control: doctors & social workers

Gang&Drug Cartel Bosses

- make super profits from high prices for illicit drugs which the drug war creates
- can manipulate the unregulated market to maximize profits, for example switch over from heroin to fentanyl

Big Banks & Corporations

- laundering of drug industry money keeps large quantities of cash circulating through the big banks
- fills private and public prisons creating profits for privatized prisons and private contractors to public prisons
- creates a source of cheap prison labour for big capitalists

Imperialist States

- use drug war as a justification to interfere, militarize and invade poor countries for their own economic and political reasons
- participate in the illicit drug industry to fund covert operations
- use drug war to fund right wing governments who will push their economic agenda of privatization, deregulation and other neoliberal economic policies (for example in Colombia, Mexico, and Philippines)

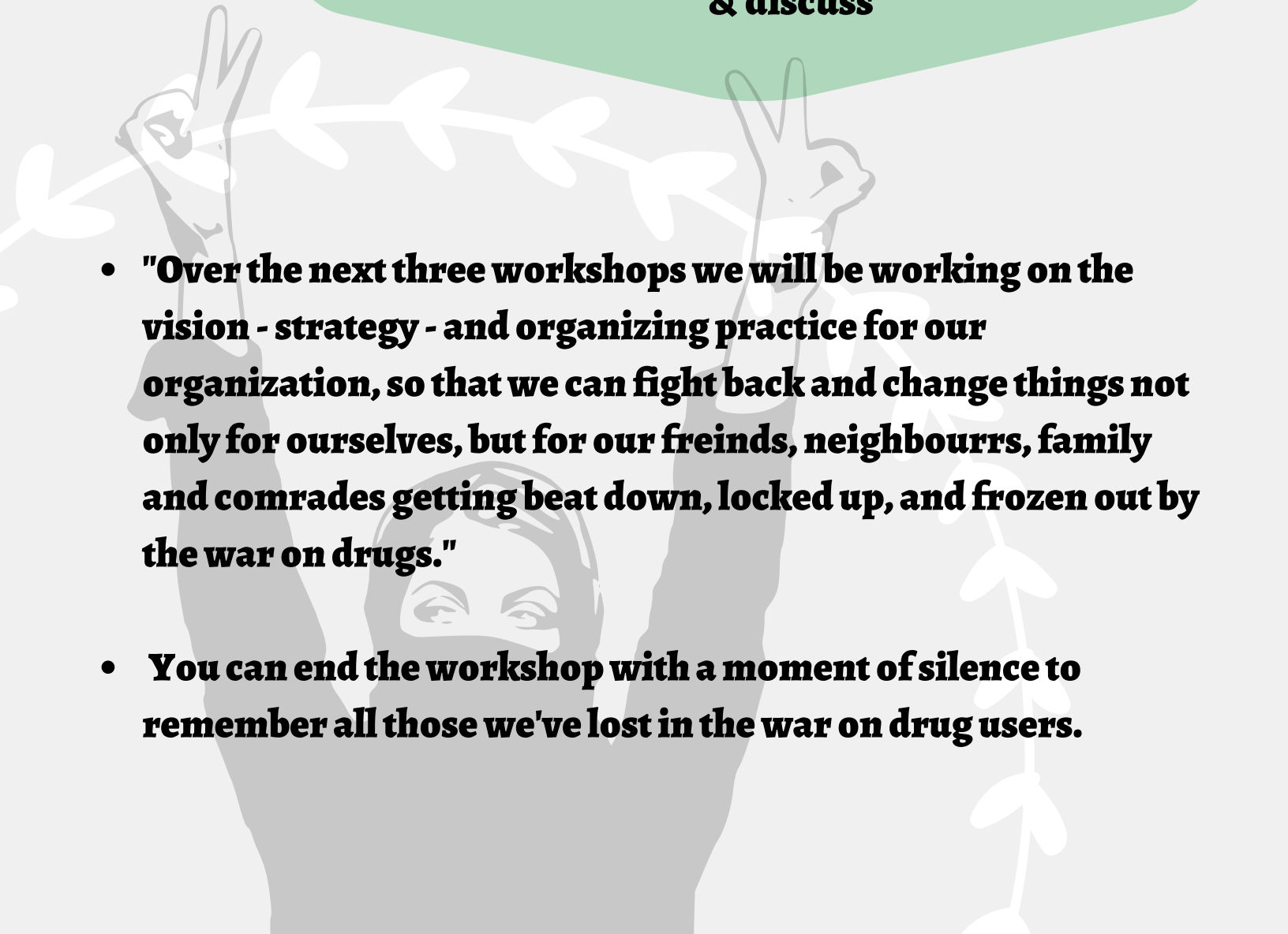
The
Big
Picture!



1.3

Action

- **"Does anyone here think that any of these groups who benefit from the war on drugs are going to give up these benefits without a fight?"**
- **"If the answer is no (and it is!), then we need to figure out how we can defeat a much more powerful enemy, using the weapon we have - solidarity and strength in numbers."**
- **Present the Vision - Strategy - Organization image & discuss**

- 
- **"Over the next three workshops we will be working on the vision - strategy - and organizing practice for our organization, so that we can fight back and change things not only for ourselves, but for our freinds, neighbourrs, family and comrades getting beat down, locked up, and frozen out by the war on drugs."**
 - **You can end the workshop with a moment of silence to remember all those we've lost in the war on drug users.**

We are somebody
you can terrorize with hate
demonize with lies
lock us up, tear us down
try

We are a
strong + revolutionary
community

and no one can be
for human beings
they oughta be if we
aren't for human being we
oughta be

Nobody can be anybody all by themselves
so whether of us deny
it or whether we embrace it

We are each others brothers + sisters
we are each others only chance
for a life in common
~~and~~ real beauty

we are all each other has
we are all somebody.

VISION

STRATEGY

ORGANIZATION

FROM A SONG OF HOPE

Vision is the better future we are fighting for and trying to make. We need vision to make sure we are going in the right direction, fighting for things that actually matter and not going into traps or down dead ends that the system will try to trick us with. Our vision can also limit where we can get, if its too narrow or limited. "You only get what you're organized to take," so if our vision is just little reforms, that's all we're ever likely to achieve. If our vision is of liberation, we're gonna win the little reforms along the way anyways, but we also give ourselves a chance of **changing** things in a much bigger way.

Strategy

Strategy answers the big picture questions about how we organize ourselves and how we fight our enemies. Our strategy flows from our understanding of the social world, of who has power and who doesn't, how we fit into this social structure and who is there with us.

Organization

Organization is the vehicle that moves us along the pathway toward our vision of liberation. It is the structure and set of agreements about how we are going to relate to each other, how we are going to resolve conflicts between us in ways that aren't destructive to our movement and how we are going to take action in ways that build our collective power over the long term.

2.0

"WE'RE NOT SUPPOSED TO BE SOME BULLSHIT NGO"

Workshop outline:

- **The Wall and the Tree**
- **Principles of a liberation oriented drug user movement**
- **Envisioning an organization of drug users fighting for liberation**

This workshop

will help participants think about what liberation looks like. Its not just what we're fighting against but what we're fighting for! The workshop challenges participants to think about what types of organizations and organizational structures can get us there, and which ones are "bullshit dead ends". What does the work of building grassroots, democratic organizations to fight for liberation look like on a day to day basis?

2.1 Experiences

- **Acknowledgement of Indigenous Territory**
- **Mission Statement**
- **Set up two pieces of flipchart paper.**
- **You can put some designs of bricks on one and a tree on the other if you want. You can also start this session off by playing Pink Floyd if you want.**

"We're not supposed to be some bullshit

NGO."



- **Start by asking: "What are some of the bricks in the drug war wall that hold us back?"**
- **Examples here are things like cops, stigma, tainted drug supply, homelessness and neglected housing projects, prisons, child apprehension.**
- **Once you've gathered some 'bricks' try to get participants to imagine what the liberatory alternative is. You can use the chart on the next page to help you think through how this might go. In many cases you will need to push participants to think beyond just small reforms to what an expansive view of liberation would look like.**

THE WALL AND THE TREE CHEAT SHEET

A Brick in the Wall

A reform we can fight for

What we really want and need. (Liberation)

cops & criminalization

Community control of the police, especially in Indigenous communities

End to criminalization, cops and the punishment paradigm

Poisoned Drug Supply

\Safe Supply for opiates, stimulants and other drugs.

Ending the war on drugs, collectively learning how to regulate and use drugs in ways that support individuals and communities without punishing and criminalizing

Homelessness, and shitty housing

No more shelters that feel like prisons. No more housing that has barriers which jeopardize your housing. Descent, affordable housing options for everyone

Culturally appropriate housing, with multi-generational communities, and cooperative & transparent decision making. Ending rent, landlordism and profiteering from housing.

Child Apprehension

Representation from Indigenous people and people who use drugs in child welfare systems. Keeping families together. Giving economic, cultural & social support to families.

An approach that supports the whole family and community to heal, and puts the wellness of children and their caregivers at the centre.

Stigma and discrimination

Recognizing addiction as a health condition. Respecting the personhood of people who use drugs

Understanding that drug use is a pretty universal, non-deviant behavior and that drugs can bring pleasure, insight and connection without creating harms. Understanding addiction as a social problem that has to be addressed collectively.

2.2 Analysis

- **"What does a social justice and liberation oriented drug user group look like?"** Take a few minutes to look at materials from other drug user groups:
 - **VANDU's 5 Essential Elements of Drug User Organizing** (page in this book)
 - **Principles of a Liberation Oriented Drug User Movement** (page in this book)
 - **KANDU Promises** (page in this book)
 - **BCYADWS Constitution** (page in this book)
 - **Manifesto for a Drug User Liberation Movement** (supplementary longer material, available online at <https://vandureplace.wordpress.com/research/vandu-manifesto/>)
- **Read out each material (or a portion you've selected) and ask participants what they think. You can ask participants in group to read out sections of the materials too. Try to generate some discussion of the methods & ideas that are proposed in these documents.**



Accountability and Commitment

Examples of Kandu promises to their members are as such:

Treat every member fairly and make sure they feel valued, offer mentorship with capacity building skills & life skills

Giving equal opportunities to become a voice by participating in zoom calls/training/webinars/conferences etc...

Making sure peers time and expertise is valued and they are paid fairly and accordingly.

Lastly a good drug user group does not set up group barriers for new members to become a member, we are not bias and provide support for peers by peers

Examples of Kandu peer coordinator/ peer promises are as follows:

As a peer coordinator or leader I do not live in bias, and promise to provide mentorship for peers

I promise to attend meetings for self care and wellness for myself and others.

If employed as a peer I promise to do a wellness check-in with either one of the coordinators

Reach out to one of Peer Coordinator's regarding anything to do with your position or ideas for/with Kandu.

To be honest to self and to others with no judgements

To treat everyone how you would want to be treated

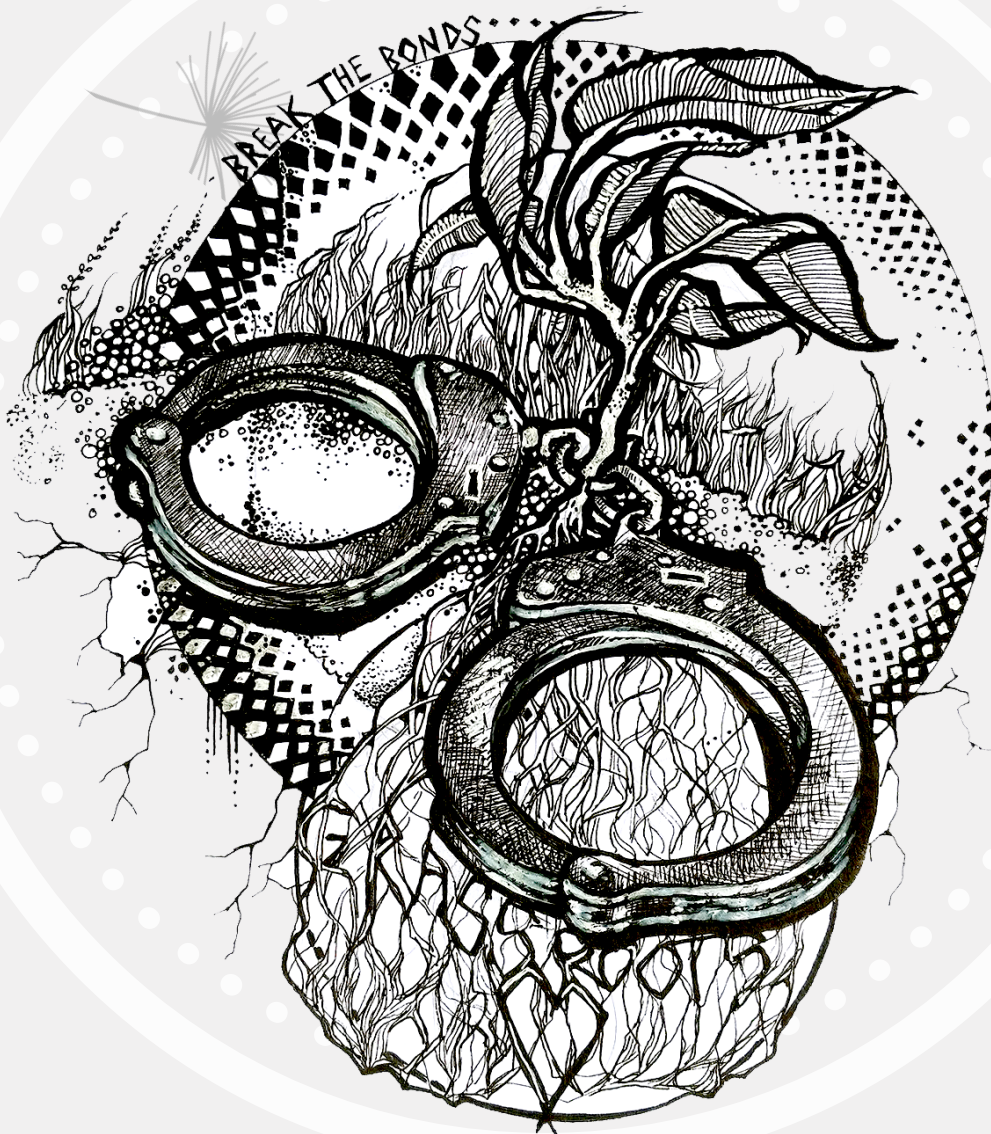
To be respectful to self and each other

"Trust is not bought or given it is gained and earned"

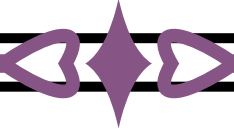
2.3

Action

- Discussion: "What kind of spirit and vision do we want our organization to have?"
- Brainstorm some elements of your vision and talk about them. Encourage people to think big here and envision this as a transformative movement!
- Write some of the ideas that you have up on flipchart paper and keep these, you'll go back to them in the last workshop.
- You can end the workshop with a moment of silence to remember all those we've lost in the war on drug users.

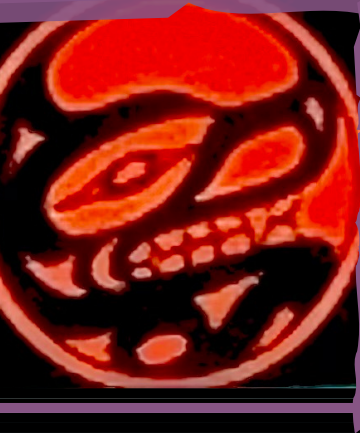


CULTURE IS NECESSITY



The Indigenous peoples of BC are impacted by the opioid crisis and are over five times more likely to experience a overdose compared to non-Indigenous people. This crisis is called a crisis of social disconnection. Restoring Indigenous culture helps the community with acceptance and understanding of this new time we now live in. Traditional teachings are more meaningful for Indigenous people. Communities are beginning to practice safer techniques and incorporating culture with their teachings.

Indigenous Harm Reduction Principles And Practices



**A SYMBOL OF
RELATIONSHIP
AND CARE.**

HEALING
REQUIRES
WORKING
TOGETHER AS
ONE HEART AND
MIND.

HUMAN CENTRED
RELATIONSHIPS
WITH SELF AND
OTHERS



**A SYMBOL OF
STRENGTH AND
PROTECTION.**

HEALING IS
EMBEDDED IN
CULTURE AND
TRADITION.

INTERGENERATIONAL
STRENGTHS ARE
METHODS OF HARM
REDUCTION ON THEIR
OWN



**A SYMBOL OF
KNOWLEDGE AND
WISDOM**

HEALING REQUIRES
TIME, PATIENCE AND
REFLECTION

KNOWLEDGE
SYSTEMS ARE
STRONGLY
CONNECTED TO
SPIRITUALITY &
HOLISM



**A SYMBOL OF
IDENTITY AND
TRANSFORMATION**

HEALING REQUIRES
KNOWING WHO YOU
ARE AND ACCEPTING
WHO YOU WERE.

VEIHING ADDICTION
AS A HEALTH AND
SOCIAL ISSUE NOT A
MORAL OR CRIMINAL
ISSUE

VANDU'S FIVE ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS OF DRUG USER ORGANIZING:

1. Involve the most marginalized drug users. At VANDU our principle is to judge the work that we are doing by how it affects the most marginalized drug user on the streets and in the alleys. We connect to and involve the most marginalized users by having weekly meetings that are well publicized, that recognize and value people's participation with a \$5 stipend, and that engage with the actual experiences of drug users dealing with housing, cops, prison, welfare, healthcare, bad dope, violence against women and more.

2. Create a democratic process where people who use illicit drugs have real power in the drug user organization. In addition to regular weekly meetings, which give opportunity for input and feedback on the activities of the group, it is important to have clear democratic mechanisms for people who use drugs, including the most marginalized, to exercise power and control in the organization. At VANDU this is realized through a board of directors that is composed entirely of current and former drug users and is elected by the membership (current and former drug users) at the Annual General Meeting. This activist board meets at least once a week and is the leading governing body for the organization.

3. Spread the wealth. One of the dynamics that sometimes occurs in drug user organizations (and other organizations of poor and marginalized people too) is that when they get funding, a small group of leaders monopolizes the cash. This is not abnormal or criminal or even morally wrong – people who have put a lot of work in want to reap what they've sowed. But the best strategy for building a real mass movement of people who use drugs is to try to share the wealth amongst a large number of participating members. In VANDU history the \$5 meeting is the tactic that has been essential in involving the most marginalized drug users. It's not a lot of money, and it's not a wage or a bribe. It is a recognition that it is very difficult for very poor, addicted people to volunteer their time, or get involved in a social movement, but that their voice is essential, and is valued. At VANDU 20% – 40% of the budget (the equivalent of more than one full time staff position) goes to stipends for members to participate in meetings, board meetings, harm reduction activities and other volunteer capacities that support the organization and its mission.

4. Clarify the relationship between users and non-users in the organization. People who are not users of illicit drugs can play an important role in supporting drug user organizations. However dynamics can arise where non-drug users position themselves as spokespersons for people who use drugs without proper process or accountability – or the opposite where a non-drug user is selected as the genuine representative of a drug user organization but is marginalized or ignored because they are 'not a user'. To avoid this, the drug user group needs to be clear about what the role of non-users is, and isn't. At VANDU non-users cannot be members, vote for the board or become a board member. Non-users can be hired as staff, or participate as volunteers, but in these capacities they are accountable to the board and the membership.

5. Have a social justice perspective. Systemic factors shape why and how people use, and become addicted to, drugs. These include colonization, systemic racism, male chauvinism and violence, homophobia, forced migration, discrimination against people with disabilities and mental illness, poverty and class. Liberation for people who use drugs is tied up with a broader movement for social justice and requires building alliances with other social movements.

3.0

ALL OF US OR NONE



Workshop outline:

- **What is solidarity?**
- **Why we must build solidarity between the drug user liberation movement and Indigenous struggles.**
- **Solidarity as Strategy**

**This
workshop**

"We have a shared enemy. So if one group can make change it benefits both." This workshop explores solidarity, both inside our movement and with other movements of oppressed people, and argues that solidarity isn't only the right thing to do, but also a key point of strategy, a tool we need to use consciously to give ourselves a chance of ever winning: "It's a bigger army, it's a greater force, that has a better chance of winning, and solidarity is the cornerstone."

3.1 Experiences



- **Acknowledgement of Indigenous territory**
- **Mission Statement**
- **Brainstorm: "What is solidarity?"**
- **"unity of feeling or action, especially among individuals with a common interest; mutual support within a group." E.g. "factory workers voiced solidarity with the striking students" (Oxford Dictionary)**
- **Brainstorm: "What are some examples of how drug users express solidarity with each other, on the streets and in the community?"**
- **"A sense of solidarity is the basis of building a movement together. Solidarity also needs to be practiced, consciously, within and between movements, if we're ever going to build a big enough force to change the whole system."**



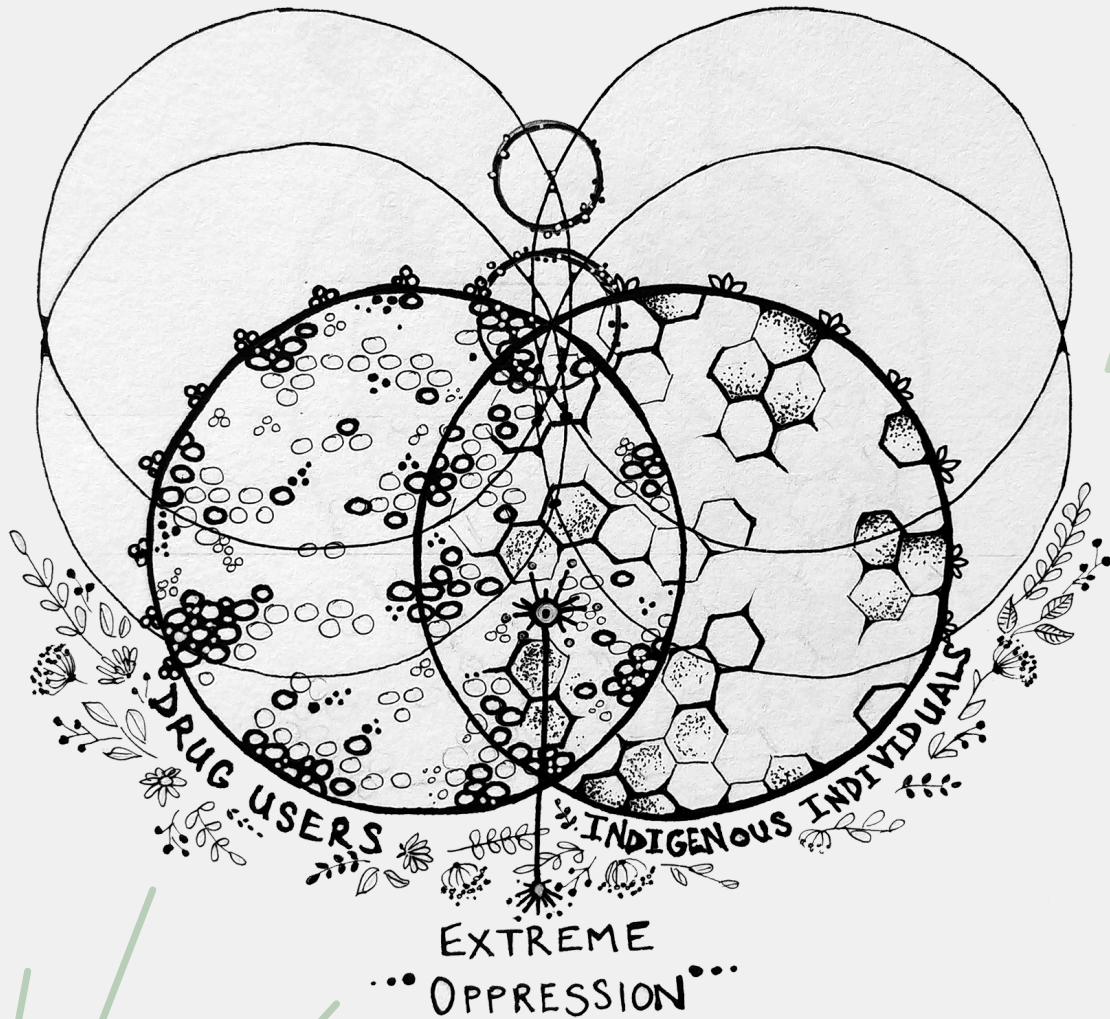
"If you have come here to help me you are wasting your time, but if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together."



"It's a bigger army, it's a greater force, that has a better chance of winning. And solidarity is the cornerstone."

3.2 Analysis

- **Brainstorm: "Why is it important that we consciously build solidarity between the drug user liberation movement and Indigenous struggles for liberation?"**



Three reasons that drug user organizations have to address colonialism and be in solidarity with Indigenous struggles:

1. **"We have the same enemy": The Canadian State and corporations are mining and plundering Indigenous lands and people to feed the capitalist system; the same Canadian State and corporation are mining poor communities and the bodies of people who use drugs to feed the prison/containment industrial complex and the medical industrial complex.**
2. **Indigenous people are also over-represented among people who use illicit drugs and alcohol due to the ongoing violence and trauma of colonization. When we talk about Indigenous people and drug war survivors, we are in many cases talking about the same people, people who's liberation is connected to both Indigenous anti-colonial & liberation struggle and an end to the drug war.**
3. **Indigenous movements for liberation have a strong potential to make change, and are a key ally for other oppressed people trying to make change.**

3.3

Action

SOLIDARITY IS OUR STRATEGY

"So if we go back to our Vision - Strategy - Organization we can see that solidarity is a key element of our strategy. We need solidarity within our movement to build unity among drug users so that we can build a big enough movement to start to have an impact. We also need solidarity across movements, with other movements of oppressed people, because we are fighting against a common enemy, and a very powerful one, and we will need our combined might to make any real lasting change."

- **Brainstorm: "So what do we mean when we say, solidarity is our strategy - how do we put this into practice?"**

Examples: bringing together people from different drug scenes, building a practice that is open to and inclusive of the most criminalized, excluded and stigmatized; having a democratic process where everyone has a voice and vote; making links with other movements of oppressed people, supporting them, and learning from them;

Write your answers to this brainstorm question up on a piece of flipchart paper. Keep it so that you can come back to it in the next session.

You can end the workshop with a moment of silence to remember all those we've lost in the war on drug users.



4.0

DRUG USER LIBERATION MOVEMENT

Workshop outline:

- The problem with service provision and NGOs
- Organizational practice - democracy, autonomy, solidarity & struggle
- Putting it all together: vision-strategy-organization redux

this workshop

participants are challenged to think through: what kind of organization is the best vehicle to get us to liberation? How should our organization relate to the government, NGOs and other institutions? How should it function internally?



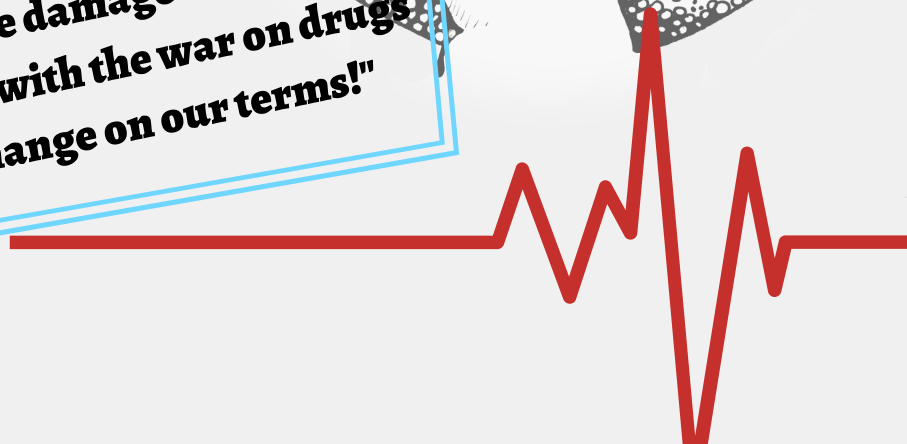
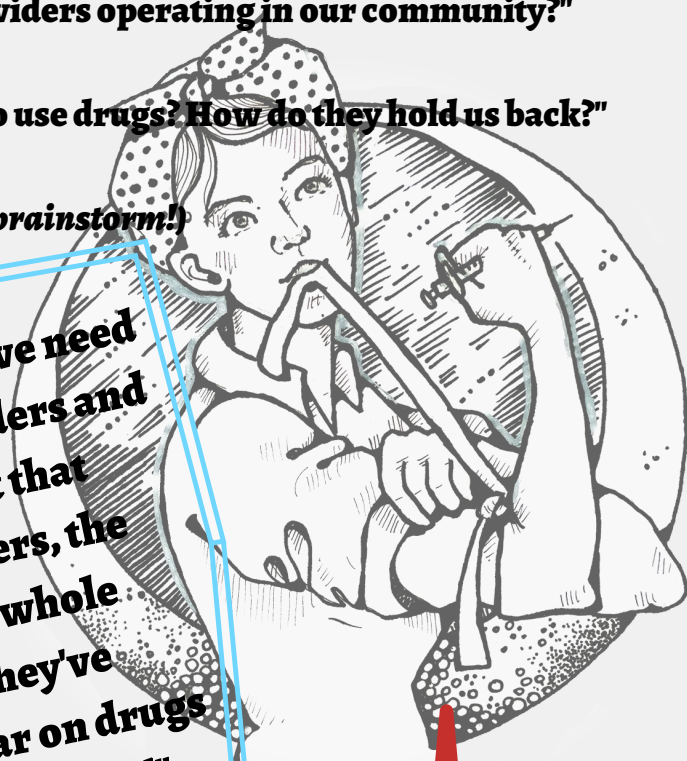
4.1 Experiences

**“Power grows from organization...
Freedom is never given. It must be taken.
And therefore you only get what you are
organized to take!”**

- **Acknowledgement of Indigenous territory**
- **Mission Statement**
- **"Now lets talk about what kind of organizations we need to build if we really want to make long term changes that end the war on drugs and improve things for all people who use drugs. We need to start by understanding how a grassroots, social justice oriented group is different from the types of NGOs and service providers that we see everywhere where there are poor people."**
- **Mini-Brainstorm: "Who are some of the service providers operating in our community?"**
- **Activity: "How do service providers help people who use drugs? How do they hold us back?"**

(You can use the model on the facing page to help with this brainstorm!)

• **"If we really want to change the system we need more than just to emulate service providers and NGOs, we need a grassroots movement that takes action, and holds service providers, the governments that fund them, and the whole system accountable for the damage they've caused our communities with the war on drugs and fights for positive change on our terms!"**



THE PROBLEM WITH SERVICE PROVISION AND NGOS

How do they hold us back?

How do these service providers help us?

Meet basic needs (for food or shelter) and allow us to survive

Connect us to other services that we might need

Subject to arbitrary rules & decisions

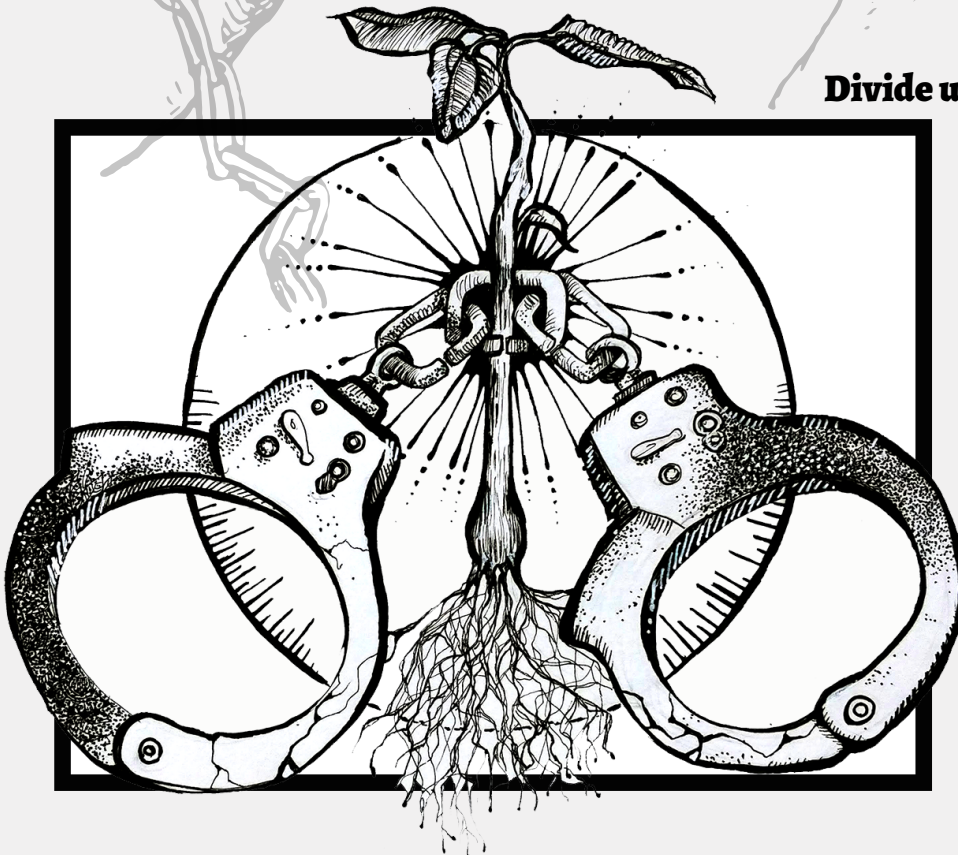
We have no power, we're conditioned to "accept what we get"

Make us less visible and manage our poverty with dealing with the root causes

Use the energy and creativity of our community ('peer workers') to support their own economic and organizational goals

Reinforce the charity (not social justice) model of service provision

Divide us into the "deserving poor" and the "ungrateful"



op·pres·sion

/ə'preʃən/

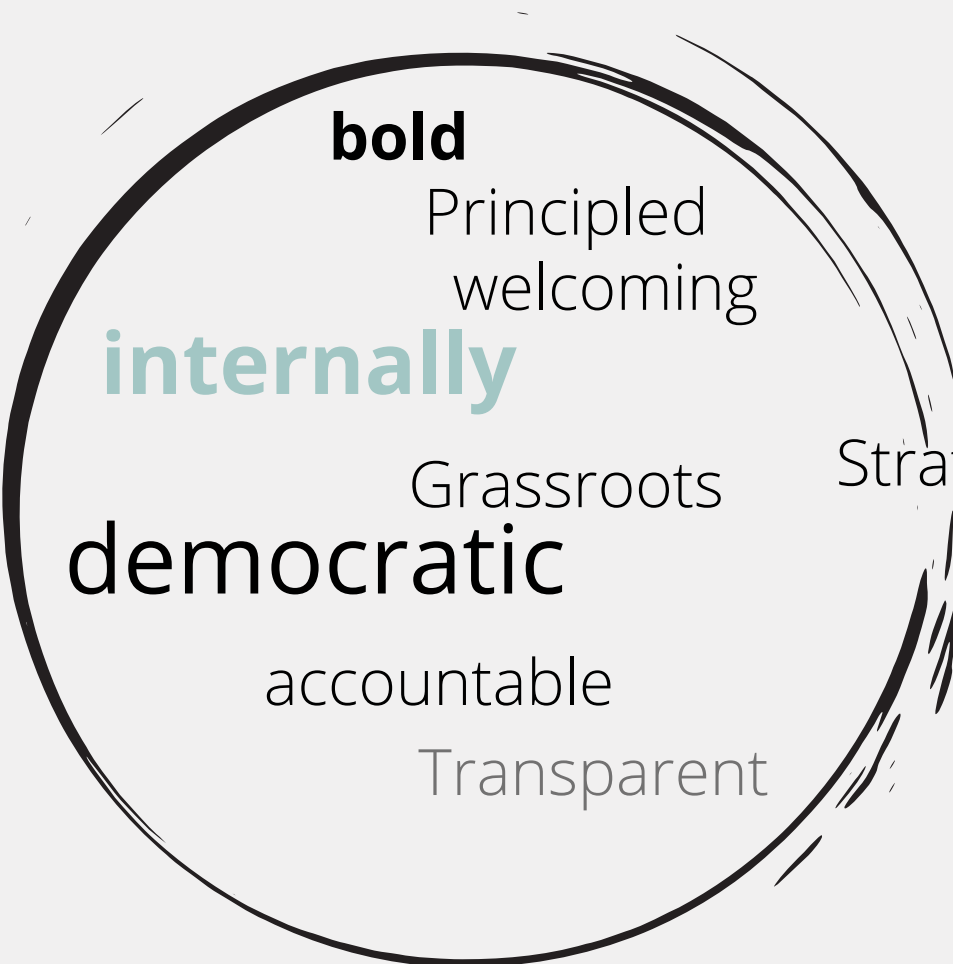
(noun)

prolonged cruel or unjust treatment or control

4.2

Analysis

- **Set up a piece of flipchart paper with a large circle in the middle.**
- **"Now let's think about how our grassroots, liberation oriented, drug user group would be different from these NGOs and service providers."**
- **During this brainstorm activity pull out key words that describe what you want your organization to be. Put the words that describe how the organization will function internally inside the circle and those that describe external functioning outside.**



Autonomous

externally

militant

effective

How do we want our organization to function? Internally (in the interaction between members) & Externally (in its interaction with other institutions, organizations and forces)

Grassroots

**consciously organizes a mass base
of people who use drugs
including the most oppressed and
marginalized**

welcoming

*creates an organizational culture where
when
people who use drugs step in they feel
like they've come home*

Strategic

**takes action for a reason, focuses on making meaningful changes,
doesn't get caught up in action for actions sake**

MILITANT

**doesn't accept the system as it is, constantly trying
to change things for the better, understands that there are
oppressed and oppressors and takes side with the oppressed**

accountable

**leaders in the organization need to
answer to the members and there are
mechanisms for holding leaders
accountable if they behave badly**

**ORGANIZATION
CHARACTERISTICS**

BOLD

not afraid to take risks and challenge the system

Principled

**knows what it stands for and fights
for its vision of liberation, doesn't
take the easy path of compromise
and cooptation**

democratic

**has specific mechanisms for the members of the organization
to elect their leadership and to make
decisions and influence the organization**

Autonomous

*controlled by and accountable to the members
and the movement, not controlled
by any outside organization or institution*

effective

**constantly asking, 'how can we have more of an impact',
concerned with making a real difference
for people who use drugs**

*"It isn't harm
reduction if it isn't
intersectional"*

4.3

Action

- **Share the Vision-Strategy-Organization image with the group again with the group.**
- **Put up the flipchart you saved from 2.3 (Vision), 3.3 (Strategy) and 4.2 (Organization)**
- **This is the basic political outline of your organization!**
- **Spend some time thinking about your next steps: When are your regular meetings going to be? How are you going to let other drug users in the community know? What does your group want to take action on first?**
- **You can end the workshop with a moment of silence to remember all those we've lost in the war on drug users.**



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**WITH LOVE TO ALL OF OUR COMRADES THAT WE
HAVE LOST TO THE WAR ON DRUG USERS. ☪**



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We Are Somebody

Drug User Movement

You can criminalize our pain
Pulverize our human rights
Dehumanize us with charity
But we are somebody

You can terrorize with hate
Demonize with lies
Lock us up
Tear us down
Try to drive us outta town
But we are somebody

We are a strong and revolutionary community

And no one can be the human beings they oughta be
If we aren't the human beings we oughta be

Nobody can be anybody all by themselves

So whether others deny it
Or whether we embrace it
We are each others brothers and sisters
We are each others only chance
For a life in common and real beauty
We are all each other has
We are all somebody.

