

## **A Personal View - Inside the UN take on solving “the world drug problem”**



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With some excitement and a good helping of scepticism I set off to my first CND (Commission on Narcotic Drugs), which occurs annually and is the central drug policy-making body within the United Nations system. It was the event that was going to draft proposals for UNGASS (United Nations General Assembly Special Session on Drugs), to which we had been working towards for the past 3 years. I had been given many views of CND but most fell into 2 camps, those that cherished ever moment and those that saw attendance as an annoying obligation – I went with Judith Yates and Sebastian Saville, one from each camp.

I decided to try and learn all I could and soak up the experience but it wasn't easy. The excellent orientation meeting in Vienna put on by IDPC helped a lot but made me even more aware that CND was going to be a different experience! When adding the term “abuse” to a UN document was seen as a success, I knew it was going to be a long week. (NB: Drug “abuse” replaced drug use so that non-dependent use was not included). Next day I entered the main hall and heard a few speeches from member states (53 countries make up CND). Some were good e.g. Canada; most were mediocre and a few really shocked me. I had to leave after hearing a speaker supporting the death penalty for drug crime in almost the same sentence as the need for good community support.

The main purpose of the 57<sup>th</sup> CND was to create an outcomes document, which would be “short, substantive, concise and action – oriented”. It was an opportunity for a detailed examination of the linkages between prohibition, violence and organized crime, the corrosive impact of corruption on many countries, to explore new distribution systems and re-visit the “world drug problem”. Proposals had also been tabled to ensure that drug control measures were in harmony with treaties safeguarding human rights and to push back against countries applying the death penalty for drug offences.

Sadly none of this happened. After the week the consensus statement simply reaffirmed the three drug control conventions with no admission of flaw, fault or

contradiction. Many who had been doing this for years told me that only via compromise could agreement be reached with all member states. In turn, such consensus is needed because the document recognizes that “the world drug problem remains a common and shared responsibility.”

But I didn't get it – how could so many countries not fight for the end of the death penalty or insist all countries provide humane evidence-based treatment for drug problems? Why did so many allow international diplomacy to miss the opportunity for real change around drug control?

But there were some rays of hope. For the first time “access to controlled medications for medical use” was added. Many palliative care and pain organizations had been striving for this for many years and we had focused on this in our campaign leading up to UNGASS. Also I met many extraordinary people, most of whom are doing this work in such difficult circumstances. They are too many to mention but know who they are but I would like to mention one, Zippy who spoke at IDHDP side-session, who came to the access to pain medication fight in Kenya after, even as a doctor, could not help her younger brother as he died in excruciating pain.

The other highlight was Vienna – what a beautiful city. After the experiences of the CND, walking on average 8 kms around the corridors per day and the totally bizarre system of registering for UNGASS, I decided to not attempt going there and decided to experience it second-hand via Judith and Sebastian.

Getting passes into the UN in New York, where UNGASS was taking place seemed to frustrate all. People like Yuri Fedotov and many other high level speakers all seemed to bathe in how important it was for Civil Society to be there and help shape future drug policy - some sounding as if it had been their idea. Perhaps they could have done more to make it easier for NGO's to get in. Then again – it is New York where security is always tough. Sebastian seemed to get in to any of the sessions he wanted but he'd probably get into Fort Knox if he wanted.

The “outcome document” signed off in Vienna was immediately adopted, meaning there was no room for change – people found this deeply frustrating. The document didn't acknowledge the comprehensive failure of the current drug control regime to reduce drug supply and demand, or the damaging effects of outdated policies on violence and corruption as well as on population health, human rights and wellbeing. By reaffirming that the three international conventions are the “cornerstone of global drug policy”, the document sustains an unacceptable and outdated legal status quo.

UNGASS did not address the critical flaws of international drug policy, call for an end to the criminalization and incarceration of people who use drugs or even urge states to abolish capital punishment for drug-related offences! We were

really saddened and angry that it did not advocate for harm reduction and treatment strategies that many of us have worked in and have demonstrated indisputable effectiveness.

Had we hoped for too much? Were the differences between countries too great ever to be able to agree on the 'world drug problem'? How can a colleague in Russia who has to help his/her patients without access to evidence-based treatment and watch as many become HIV and HCV positive because of draconian national drug policies be compared with my friend who works, raises her children and enjoys life whilst on methadone maintenance in London?

IDHDP accepts that drugs can cause problems for some people – however the real problem is how drugs and more importantly drug policy disproportionately affects the poorest members of society as well as people of colour.

There were some positives at UNGASS, particularly in the side-sessions and outside the corridors of power. OSF's Museum of Drug Policy was fascinating and provided real insight into some of the history.

Perhaps we need to accept and celebrate the great work many governments and civil society groups have achieved and the many positive drug policy reforms already underway around the world. In fact many federal, state and city governments are adopting progressive legislation and testing new approaches. This is going to be the way forward – individual countries making changes.

The next international opportunity to address this will be in 2019 when the UN Plan of Action that calls for a "drug free world" will be reviewed. Unlike the approach taken to UNGASS - perhaps we should give it less attention and focus more on supporting individual countries in adopting drug policy reforms that are tailored to people's needs and rights. We must continue to fight for health and human rights to be at the centre of all future drug policy.

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