



People-centred strategies respecting Human Rights and public health

*by Martha Paredes Rosero**

2016 is of high significance for the debate on global drug policies due to the United Nations General Assembly Special Session on Drugs (UNGASS) 2016, which will take place from April 19th to April 21st in New York, and which goal is to review progress in facing the world drug problem, and assess both achievements and challenges. Undoubtedly, it consists in an unprecedented opportunity to raise awareness about the world drug problem and the urgent necessity to coordinate resources and efforts in people-centred strategies.

The European Union and its Member States have issued a series of important recommendations for the upcoming UNGASS. Similarly, Colombia has carried out an extensive and substantial consultation process with different sectors and actors, so as to form its position and generate recommendations that would contribute enriching the debate and bettering the orientation of antidrug policy. Among these recommendations I would like to single out this of a greater flexibility within the conventions' dispositions, what would provide room for a broad range of perspectives and actions in drug policies in accordance with regional and national specificities.

For their part, the CELAC Member States have consolidated a regional position to accommodate the need for new approaches centred on the human being and recognising the exclusion of the most vulnerable groups from our societies. Moreover, the primacy of Human Rights, the need to counter the structural causes and prevent the social damages generated from the drug problem have been recognised, as well as the States' right to design their policies on the basis of their own realities. Additionally, the development of alternative measures in the provision of justice is being promoted, while recognising that drug abuse is a public health concern.

In other words, this debate on global drug policies needs to be continued through regional dialogue and consensus, searching for innovative alternatives, each State revising its national policy in accordance with its own realities.

This is an historic moment of reconsideration of both intervention and cooperation strategies, in which the EU and CELAC have been working together for several years. Colombia maintains a very active cooperation agenda with the EU that significantly contributed to strengthening the country's response capacity, and is deemed crucial for the implementation of a national drugs policy consistent with the approaches of Human Rights, public health, supply-demand balance, the promotion of information, research and assessment, among others.

Colombia is one of the countries which for decades have been experiencing social, environmental and institutional damages associated with drug trafficking and is gradually shifting towards a social and humane approach putting people – instead of drugs - at the centre of the policies.



Even though there are important achievements in drug control, the persistence of the problem - in spite of the considerable efforts and the dramatic human, economic and social costs borne by the country - is one of the main priorities. As far as consumption is concerned, Colombia is undergoing a critical situation of increased domestic consumption. According to the latest national survey on drugs consumption, the percentage of persons having used at least once illicit substances such as marijuana, basuco, ecstasy or heroin increased from 8,6% in 2008 to 12,17% in 2013; and are facing a problem of intravenous heroin consumption that we are only recently grasping - as until now we considered this issue to be very distant from our culture.

On the other hand, for more than a decade important achievements in the reduction of illicit crops was being made. Sown areas had decreased from 144.000 hectares in 2001 to 48.000 in 2013; important reductions in the areas sown with marijuana and poppy had likewise been achieved. This changed in 2014 when an upward trend in poppy crops in the country started. Cultivation and production of coca are deeply rooted, which prevents the actions implemented from overcoming the problem. In this context, the National Government recognises the need to rethink the current actions and that those ought to answer to the new trends and challenges of illicit crop production in national territory, through evaluations carried out on the efficiency and effectiveness of the programmes applied for reducing the first link of the drugs' production chain.

On that basis, Colombia's drug policy emphasises the importance of the conditions of social vulnerability and inclusion, in which reside the deepest causes of production and consumption. It is centred on addressing consumption from a public health approach; designing policies oriented towards reducing or eliminating damages associated with consumption; guaranteeing equitable access to controlled substances for medical and scientific uses; and the non-stigmatisation of drug users.

In the framework of alternative development, the need to modify the vulnerability conditions of affected territories is being considered. This should be done by intervening under an integral approach, oriented towards improving the opportunities, quality of life and territorial conditions of the population exposed to the illicit economy. This approach is based on the following premise: if the actions of the State do not modify the conditions of the affected territory, vulnerabilities persist *ipso-facto* illicit activities remain a viable alternative.

The Government is analysing alternatives to incarceration for offenders who commit minor drug-related crimes, aiming at identifying adequate and reasonable actions to respond to the issues of application of the Criminal Law as the only avenue to crime from a Human Rights and public health approach, as well as to tackle the issue of prison overpopulation, and disproportionate sentences for drugs offences. It is intended to identify alternatives to penal and penitentiary treatments, which could address the specificities of each link in the drugs chain and the degree of the offences committed. Within this framework, it is necessary to address drug consumption associated with the commission of crimes by means of strategies promoting treatment or non-criminal record alternatives, and seeking to overcome the addiction of those who committed crimes either



with the purpose of obtaining the substance, or under the influence of some narcotic drugs.

Under these new approaches, it is important that all States address the criminal phenomena derived from drug trafficking with a rational and effective policy, formulated and implemented strategically, and having as primary goal the dismantlement of organised crime.

In a nutshell, we are living an historical moment in terms of drug policies which moves us towards more social and humane approaches, in the search for differentiated, effective and innovative actions. UNGASS shall generate a common front facing the new dynamics and realities of the world drug problem, recognising State autonomy in formulating innovative policies that take into account its own reality.

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To learn more about the Colombian context (in Spanish):

Ministerio de Justicia y del Derecho - Observatorio de Drogas de Colombia. (2015)
[La Heroína en Colombia, Producción, uso e impacto en la salud pública- Análisis de la evidencia y recomendaciones de política.](#) ODC: Bogotá DC.

Ministerio de Justicia y del Derecho - Observatorio de Drogas de Colombia. (2016)
[Reporte de Drogas de Colombia 2015.](#) ODC: Bogotá DC.

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https://eulacfoundation.org/en/system/files/UNGASS_Paredes_ES_1.pdf