



A public health approach as a base for Drugs Policy: a main outcome of UNGASS 2016

*by João Castel-Branco Goulão**

On 19th to 21st April 2016 there will be a United Nations General Assembly Special Session (UNGASS) held in New York, dedicated to the world drug problem.

The last time such a meeting of UN Member States took place, to assess and debate the international drug policy, was in 1998. Since then, the drug policy landscape has changed. Several social, political and economic changes took place over the last years. Indeed, there is an ongoing international debate on a need for a change on the status quo, with some countries calling for a new approach, while voicing displeasure with the existing international control system.

The upcoming UNGASS 2016 is, therefore, an important and unique opportunity for all Member States, civil society and international organizations to properly assess the international strategy to tackle the world drug problem. It offers an opportunity to learn from the policies of the past, raise awareness of the challenges that exist at global, national and local level, and provide a solid input towards the target date of 2019 and beyond.

The European Union and its Member States have been very much engaged in all this UNGASS preparatory process, providing contributions and defining its common position, with which Portugal aligns itself fully.

The EU has identified several principles, concerns and priorities that should be reflected in the UNGASS outcome. I would like to highlight, on my own initiative, some of those elements.

First of all, the need to rebalance drug policies towards a human rights and public health based approach. UNGASS 2016 should be a turning point in this issue, which has been widely recognized: **Drug use is a public health issue**. The Portuguese approach on drugs has been considered a model of best practices, due to the fact that we recognize drug use as a health issue and drug dependence as a multi-factorial health disorder condition, which needs to be treated and not punished.

Other key principles for which the EU stands for are the abolition of death penalty for drug related crimes; alternatives to incarceration and coercive sanctions as well as proportionality of sentencing and the commitment to the risk and harm reduction approach.



These are some of the issues, among others, which need a strong EU response during the negotiations and that Portugal strongly supports.

The European Union and CELAC have been cooperating on drug matters for a very long time. This cooperation builds on mutual understanding of shared responsibility, a balanced and evidence-based approach, as well as a strong respect for human rights. These basic principles have been confirmed and materialized in common areas of cooperation.

Concerning specifically the UNGASS process, the Latin America and the Caribbean region is a key partner for the EU. Positions taken thus far by the EU and CELAC seem to indicate that we could enable a greater convergence of positions between the regions. There are main challenges, risks and opportunities that the two regions face and we should increase the bi-regional dialogue and cooperation in order to address them.

The call for the abolition of death penalty for drug related crimes and the focus on a strong harm reduction language are two specific issues where both regions could become crucial allies.

In order to assure an alignment of the positions, the EU and CELAC should ensure a swift follow up of the positions taken by each region and discuss possible convergences of positions ahead of the main negotiation moments.

Regarding the Portuguese current policy on drugs, namely the decriminalization, it has been the subject of much international visibility and increased attention. Over the past 15 years, Portugal has been implementing an integrated and comprehensive drug policy, using as its main guidelines the principles of humanism and pragmatism. Each individual's personal circumstances are assessed in order to determine the best response to his or her specific needs, including *prevention* for those who have not yet been in contact with drugs, *dissuasion* for those illicitly using them and *treatment, harm reduction* and *reintegration* for addicted users. The implementation of a more health and evidence based approach was facilitated by the decriminalization of consumption and possession for personal use of all drugs, below defined quantities. A Law, in place since 2001, decriminalized personal consumption of drugs, but maintains drug use as an illicit behavior.

Reducing drug use and its consequences by improving the coverage, quality and effectiveness of demand reduction interventions are, therefore, the pragmatic aims of the Portuguese drugs policy, with particular attention to vulnerable groups, including young people and high risk groups and the prevention of polydrug use.



As a contribution to the preparations for UNGASS 2016, Portugal has been sharing its approach, emphasizing the benefits to be gained from implementing policies to reduce the harm caused by drug consumption and to socially reintegrate drug dependent individuals.

On the road to UNGASS it is essential to acknowledge that there are new policy approaches that respond to the realities on the ground, supporting policy experimentation and innovation, as those performed by some Latin American countries.

It is my sincere hope that next April, in New York, the UN high-level political gathering will be a precious opportunity for the international community to agree on a reorientation of policy priorities and resources, from punitive enforcement to proven drug health approaches, which will enhance the global response to drugs, protecting more effectively the welfare of humankind.

***João Castel-Branco Goulão** Portuguese National Coordinator for Drug Problems, Drug-Addictions and the Harmful Use of Alcohol. Official webpage: <http://www.sicad.pt/PT/Paginas/default.aspx>

This paper was prepared for the EU-LAC Foundation's Newsletter of March 2016 on the theme "The World Drug Problem". This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the EU-LAC Foundation.