



Dealing with the drug problem: towards evidence-based policies

*by Bert Koenders**

The Netherlands and the European Union have strong track records of developing evidence-based policies on drugs. The available evidence leads us to conclude that drug policies should strike a balance, combining sensible measures that curb the demand for and supply of drugs with full respect for human rights. The upcoming United Nations General Assembly Special Session on the World Drug Problem (UNGASS) provides an opportunity to hone and adopt these ideas at international level and generate momentum for putting them into practice. As the current holder of the Presidency of the Council of the EU, the Netherlands is proud to have guided the development of a common EU position for the UNGASS that fully reflects our experience.

We are currently witnessing a gradual shift towards drug policies that equally address both public health and punitive measures. As more and more countries realise, an approach based mostly on punishment does not stop people from either producing or using drugs. Harsh repressive policies have proven to be counterproductive. They hamper the dissemination of information to the public, including messages that could help to prevent drug use. They also lead to higher rates of HIV/AIDS infection, environmental problems in countries where illicit drugs are produced, insecurity and overcrowded prisons. Finally, a punitive approach to minor drug offences is not in line with international law.

Violent crime rates in Latin America are significantly higher than in most other parts of the world. Given their experience with the 'war on drugs', it is no surprise that the governments of Mexico, Colombia, Guatemala and Costa Rica were among the first in the Americas to call for more effective responses to the drug problem. The Central American and Caribbean region has historically been a transit point for illicit drug flows north to the US and Europe as well as to Africa. Drug flows in the opposite direction also often pass through the Caribbean. Countries in this region are the main drivers of reform, and we support this drive.

We believe that the old distinction between producing, transit and consuming countries is increasingly being blurred. Many countries are contending with the nefarious consequences of the narcotics trade. We need a multifocal approach, based on the evidence:

- We need to be 'soft' in our treatment of users, concentrating repressive measures on organised crime, which is responsible for the drug trade's disruptive effects on society.



- We need to target those links in the chain where the financial turnover is highest. Money may not be the root of all evil, but it is certainly a very potent fertiliser.
- We need to focus on civil security and the preservation of public institutions. Violence, corruption and money laundering go hand in hand, and their effects are highly contagious.

Human rights are an essential theme in the international debate on drugs, and the EU is one of the main advocates of the abolition of the death penalty. A great deal of work still needs to be done worldwide in reducing harm and developing a more balanced approach to the problem of drugs. WHO and civil society should play a major role on this issue, and we believe it is vital to sustain support for these organisations' participation in the debate.

UNGASS provides an opportunity to rethink international drug law enforcement and its consequences for security and development. As the date of UNGASS draws near, we need to ensure that every country will be able to get its message across in Vienna. The Kingdom of the Netherlands, which is both European and Caribbean, is a natural partner for Latin American countries in promoting evidence-based policies, developing an intelligent approach to law enforcement and public health, focusing on violence reduction, and contributing to the health and welfare of society. Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean should work together to achieve these goals.

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