

# Engaging with the 2016 UNGASS: A briefing for the development sector

In 2016, the UN General Assembly will hold a Special Session (or ‘UNGASS’) on the issue of illicit drugs.<sup>1</sup> The UNGASS will review member states’ progress on reducing drug supply and demand, and will shape the future direction of drug policy at the UN level. The session was initiated by Southern governments, led by Colombia, Guatemala, and Mexico. The UNGASS provides a chance for a more open and balanced discussion than the law-enforcement-dominated Commission on Narcotic Drugs, which normally manages the UN’s approach to drug issues, and the UNGASS is also seeking input from a wide range of UN agencies, including the UNDP.

Meanwhile, there is a growing movement among governments and communities in the global South calling for a new approach to drugs policy – an alternative to the failed “War on Drugs”. A number of Southern countries are pioneering policies that emphasise harm reduction, public health and human rights over criminalisation. Recently, Uruguay became the first country to create a national, regulated market for an internationally controlled drug (cannabis). The UNGASS is a crucial opportunity for the development sector to make its voice heard on an issue with so many ties to development and to the future of Southern communities.

## Drugs and Development

Drugs policy is a development issue: it has severe consequences for the health, livelihoods, and security of poor and marginalised people. The current international approach – dominated by a repressive “War on Drugs” approach that focuses on outlawing drug production and consumption – has exacted enormous financial and human cost. Crucially, it:

- Undermines democratic governance and state services as the power and influence of drug cartels increase, leading to a culture of fear and corruption that can make it almost impossible for citizens to access their rights.
- Diverts attention and resources from essential services to an unending war with the cartels – one that poorer governments are ill-equipped to win.
- Wastes global finance – the “War on Drugs” costs an estimated \$100 billion a year, an amount that nearly rivals the \$130 billion global aid budget.

The “War on Drugs” also affects poor communities across a range of areas, including:

### Health

- Criminalising people who use drugs and decreasing their access to treatment
- Blocking access to medical care for HIV/AIDS and other diseases spread by unsafe drug injecting, as individuals risk criminal penalties if they seek care

### Governance and Security

- Fuelling violent crime, which is reaching crisis proportions across Latin America and catalysing a widespread culture of violence, especially among young people

### Secure and Sustainable Livelihoods

- Losing tax revenue – if the use of some drugs, such as cannabis, were taxed, it could generate large sums that could be earmarked for development as a form of reparation for the damage caused to poor communities by the drugs trade

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1 <http://idpc.net/policy-advocacy/the-un-general-assembly-special-session-on-drugs-ungass-2016>

- Criminalising farmers who grow crops that have been deemed illicit, which increases and entrenches the harm caused by the drugs trade

## Environmental Justice

- Increasing pollution and deforestation through the eradication of drug crops by the authorities, and the relocation of production to new areas (including intact forests and other biodiverse areas, as well as indigenous people's lands)
- Undermining sustainable agriculture and local food production by incentivising the production of drugs

Some media sources and commentators have depicted a polarised debate on drugs with two extremes – prohibition on the one hand, and free market legalisation on the other. However, a better approach exists between these two – the use of a combination of harm reduction, decriminalisation, and legal regulation, therefore opening up a vast range of possible tools and approaches that could dramatically reduce the harm caused by both drugs and drug policies. As a result, many countries are developing more humane and evidence-based drug policies.

The development sector can play a vital role in exploring alternative policy approaches, and in joining the call from numerous governments and NGOs in the global South for the UN to adopt a more nuanced approach to drugs policy that will help end and repair the harm that has been done, especially to the world's poorest communities.

## ■ The 2016 UNGASS on Drugs Timeline

- **1990 & 1998** - Previous UNGASS meetings on drugs
- **2009** - High-Level Segment of the Commission on Narcotic Drugs: a 'Political Declaration and Plan of Action on International Cooperation' was agreed, with targets set for 2019
- **March 2014** - 57th Session of the UN Commission on Narcotic Drugs (CND) in Vienna: included a "High-level Review" and the agreement of a 'Joint Ministerial Statement' to review progress made since 2009 and the remaining challenges<sup>2</sup>
- **Autumn 2014** (if Guatemala's request for an earlier adoption is honoured) or autumn 2015 - Modalities Resolution: this will outline the process and how member states and civil society can participate. A wide range of UN agencies, including the UNDP, will also be providing input to the negotiations.
- **September 2014** - 69th Session of the UN General Assembly in New York: UNGASS preparations should begin.
- **March 2015** - 58th Session of the CND in Vienna
- **September 2015** - 70th Session of the UN General Assembly in New York
- **March 2016** - 59th Session of the CND in Vienna
- **2016** (date TBC) - The UNGASS

### Further Information and Staying in Touch

- Sign up to the development sector drug policy listserv for updates: contact Catherine Martin on [c.martin@healthpovertyaction.org](mailto:c.martin@healthpovertyaction.org)
- Sign up to Count the Costs ([www.countthecosts.org](http://www.countthecosts.org)), a global initiative that aims to raise awareness of the costs of the war on drugs. Please contact: [info@countthecosts.org](mailto:info@countthecosts.org)
- Join and subscribe to the International Drug Policy Consortium (IDPC) ([www.idpc.net](http://www.idpc.net))
- Become a member of the Vienna NGO Committee on Drugs (VNGOC) and the newly re-formed New York NGO Committee on Drugs (NYNGOC), which have the mandate to ensure NGO involvement in this process.
- For more information on the UNGASS, please contact Jamie Bridge: [jbridge@idpc.net](mailto:jbridge@idpc.net)

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