



DROGAS EN MOVIMIENTO

NUEVAS PERSPECTIVAS

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Support. Don't Punish: Advocating for the end of the war on drugs

By: Marie Nougier *

Just a few days ago, on 26th June, people from all around the world took the streets to call for the end of the war on drugs as part of the second [Support. Don't Punish Global Day of Action](#). I was among them, in London, to make my voice heard and advocate for more evidenced, humane and health- and development-based drug policies. Alongside London, another 80 cities from all around the world also organised joint actions under the common "[Support. Don't Punish](#)" slogan.

I have been working in the field of drug policy advocacy for the past six years, first at the World Health Organization, where I was first confronted with the horrendous human rights violations related to compulsory detention for people who use drugs in Asia, and then at the [International Drug Policy Consortium](#), a global network of NGOs promoting humane and evidence-based drug policy. Although drug policy reform continues to be challenging and even "taboo", the past couple of years have seen an unprecedented shift towards more dialogue on alternatives to the war on drugs.

In Latin America, the [General Assembly](#) meeting of the Organization of American States (OAS) in June 2013 was an exceptional moment when governments acknowledged the failures of overly repressive drug control strategies in place in the region. The OAS also launched two important [reports](#) on the drug problem in the Americas just prior to this event in May, which provided a good basis for the discussion. Although many countries in Latin America are agreed that serious debate is required on the future of drug control, there is still much division regarding what the alternatives could be. While in December last year, [Uruguay](#) made the headlines by becoming the first country in the world to take steps towards a state regulated cannabis market for recreational use – a ground breaking move which is not necessarily supported by other governments in the hemisphere.

Things are slowly moving ahead in North America, where the US Attorney General, Eric Holder, [recently called](#) for the end of disproportionately long prison sentences for drug offences. The states of Washington and Colorado are in the process of putting together regulatory systems for legalised cannabis markets, voted for in state-level referenda in November 2012. However, much remains to be done in the region, with some US states adopting more repressive policies – for example [Tennessee](#) has passed a new law criminalising pregnant women who use drugs for "harming their foetus". This is extremely problematic for the mother and her foetus' ability to access the healthcare services they need. The US prison population also remains one of the highest in the world, with law enforcement efforts mainly focusing on black and Hispanic minorities, especially in applying drug laws – this is one of the issues that Eric Holder is currently trying to resolve.



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Another related problem in the USA is that of drug courts – a mechanism by which low-level drug offenders are directed towards treatment, rather than incarceration. This could be an interesting move to address the issue of over-incarceration; however, in practice, drug courts have been associated with various concerns, such as sending people who are not necessarily dependent on drugs to be “treated” (since they would rather choose treatment over a prison sentence), and the fact that a person may be imposed a longer prison sentence than they would normally have if they fail their treatment programme. It is therefore worrying that this imperfect model is being exported across the world, in particular in Latin America.

As for Canada, although some fantastic policies have been developed at local level, in particular in Vancouver, where harm reduction services are well established (including the safe injection room Insite), the federal government retains and promotes a repressive approach towards drug control, both at national and international levels.

The drug policy debate is now also taking root in Africa, where the [West African Commission on Drugs has just launched](#) its [first report](#) on the need for a health- and human rights-based approach to drug policy. This is particularly important in a region where a war on drugs rationale is attracting much attention from government officials, who have the opportunity to avoid the same mistakes that have been made in other regions over the past several decades. That’s why it is crucial that an open dialogue starts now to ensure that African countries adopt policies that are evidence-based and effective at reducing drug-related crime. Another interesting initiative I participated in was one led by the Portuguese organisation APDES – a [conference](#) on drug policies in Portuguese-speaking African countries in January 2014, yet another opportunity to promote debate on drug policy in the region.

At international level, this year’s Commission on Narcotic Drugs (CND) and [High Level Segment](#) have shown that we are now in a unique situation on international drug control. Although the outcome document of the High Level Segment – the [Joint Ministerial Statement](#) – was [disappointing](#) and generally repeated previous commitments to eradicate the illicit drug market, the meeting clearly displayed an irreparable break in the international consensus on drug control. As NGOs, we almost cheered Ecuador when its drugs coordinator took the floor and asked for an urgent revision of the UN drug conventions. It was also quite emotional to see, for the first time, an official side event being organised at the CND to openly debate the legal regulatory cannabis models in Uruguay and the USA – something that would have been unthinkable even three or four years ago.



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And on the ground, the debate is moving forward, alternatives are being experimented all around the world – be it harm reduction, decriminalisation, alternative livelihoods, smarter drug law enforcement, or regulated cannabis markets – and civil society advocates are becoming increasingly empowered to participate in drug policy discussions.

For me, it was a great victory to see individuals, NGOs, academics, and even some UN and government officials coming together for the Global Day of Action under the campaign “Support. Don’t Punish” under one key message to break the taboo on drug policy reform. I hope that many of you will join me in urging our governments all around the world to end the war on drugs.

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