

IDPC Briefing Note

Drugs, crime and development – The need for system-wide coherence

June 2012

On Tuesday 26th June, the UN General Assembly will debate the topic of ‘Drugs and Crime as a Threat to Development’. This is a timely and important debate especially as it takes place in New York, where it is critical for the UN community to consider the impact of illicit drug markets on security, human rights and development, in particular the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals. This briefing outlines the key issues for the debate and underlines the importance of coherence across the UN system on the complex issue of drugs. Critical to the debate is the acknowledgement that current repressive drug control measures have often adversely affected the very communities that development policies seek to support.

The President of the General Assembly has scheduled a thematic debate for the 66th session of the General Assembly, entitled ‘Drugs and Crime as a Threat to Development’. This debate will take place on Tuesday 26th June 2012, to coincide with the UN International Day Against Drug Abuse and Illicit Trafficking, and the speakers will include His Excellency Ban ki Moon, the UN Secretary General.

In anticipation of the debate, on Monday 25th June, Guatemala’s Permanent Mission and the International Drug Policy Consortium will sponsor a discussion on the need to develop new approaches to drug control, ‘Where Now on Drug Policy? Routes to Reform’ (CR-7 NLB, 1:15-2:45 pm).

A background paper has been prepared by the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), in consultation with other UN agencies. It describes the increasingly large scale of the global illicit drug market, and the role it plays in expanding the power and reach of organised crime. The paper goes on to identify the ways in which illicit drug markets can undermine social and economic development in areas where production, distribution and consumption are concentrated.

This debate is a welcome opportunity for the New York-based UN community to consider the impact of illicit drug markets on security, human rights and development, and in particular on the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals. It is also important that this debate takes place in New York, where the perspectives of the directly responsible Vienna agencies (UNODC, the Commission on Narcotic Drugs and the International Narcotics Control Board) can be balanced with other interested UN agencies – in particular the UN Development Programme, but also the health and human rights bodies in Geneva, and Headquarters departments such as the Secretary General’s Office and the Department for Political Affairs. A coherent UN position on global drug control needs to be developed if we are to make progress in minimising the impact of transnational organised crime.

Security and law enforcement strategies are a key aspect of this response. Transnational organised crime groups that profit from drug markets pose a significant threat to the security and welfare of many communities around the world, and their ability to kill, injure, intimidate and corrupt needs to be challenged and undermined. We therefore agree with UNODC that strategies to combat organised crime and drug trafficking need to be mainstreamed within the work of development agencies.

However, it is crucial to acknowledge some ‘inconvenient truths’ regarding drug markets and our experience of tackling them if the international community is to find a global approach to drug control that is fit for the challenges of the 21st century:

- Despite the considerable political and financial commitments of the international community over the past 50 years, a law enforcement led approach to drug control has failed in achieving its core objective of shrinking the illicit drug market to a manageable level. The global drug trade continues to grow, and the profits available to the most ruthless traffickers can now be counted in the hundreds of billions of dollars. This is money taken out of legitimate economies and becoming available to support corruption, private armies, illegitimate authority, and terrorism.
- At times, our strategies and tactics have made the problem worse.

- 'Zero tolerance' philosophies towards drug use have directly undermined the fight against HIV/AIDS by stigmatising and marginalising people who use drugs, driving them to adopt more risky behaviours, and preventing the widespread implementation of the proven HIV prevention strategies endorsed by UNAIDS and the WHO. The Global Commission on Drug Policy will publish its second report on 26th June on this particular subject.
 - Punitive and repressive approaches to the economically vulnerable and marginalised communities where drug markets thrive can often work against efforts to improve the social and economic conditions of those communities. We are in a situation where one sector of the international community is working hard to eradicate the livelihoods, and arrest and punish the very same individuals and communities that another sector is working equally hard to provide support and aid to.
 - Finally, many countries have realised that aggressive but unfocused law enforcement responses to drug trafficking, often involving the military and highly armed police forces, leads to a form of 'arms race' with the traffickers, and is creating the conditions where the most violent criminals thrive, with an increase in the harms associated with the market – violence, intimidation and corruption.
- Some of the policy and tactical responses that national and local governments wish to pursue to best manage their own challenges may raise questions about continuing compliance with the international drug control treaties that have received almost universal adherence over the last 50 years. Member states are already struggling with a relatively minor and well thought through initiative from the Bolivian government that arises from their constitutional commitment to separate the indigenous practice of coca leaf chewing from the international cocaine trade. This example of the need for refinement of the system looks likely to be the first of many challenges to the rigid adherence to a set of treaties agreed in very different times. The international community needs to find a way of handling this modernisation and refinement in a planned and constructive manner – protecting the concept of solidarity and shared responsibility, while allowing governments and local administrations to pursue policies that work best in reducing the problems associated with drug markets and use.

Several member states and other global leaders and opinion formers are now calling for a re-evaluation of strategies and programmes on drug control, in particular a move towards treating the drug problem from a development, public health and human rights perspective. The urgent challenge is for the international community to comprehensively examine the strengths and weaknesses of our current strategies and openly debate the possible adjustments going forward to achieve better results, through a planned and cooperative process. These processes are already moving at national and regional level around the world. This General Assembly debate is a good opportunity for UN structures to engage in these debates from a system-wide perspective, and to search for a constructive mechanism through which to provide leadership in these discussions. We therefore respectfully make the following recommendations to the actors in the 26th June event:

To member state representatives:

- To engage in the thematic debate at a high level, and include in your statements an acknowledgment that there is a need to review progress in international drug control, and your government's willingness to support and engage in a meaningful review process.
- To call on the Secretary General to instigate a process by which member states and relevant UN bodies can conduct discussions on these issues in a systematic way, and with the full involvement of health, development and human rights agencies.

To United Nations agencies:

- To engage proactively with discussions on drug control – balancing health, development and human rights with law enforcement and security perspectives.
- To identify sustainable mechanisms, such as the UN Task Force on Transnational Organised Crime and Drug Trafficking, through which to conduct high level and open debates on the future content and direction of drug control policy.

The International Drug Policy Consortium is a global network of non-government organisations and professional networks that specialise in issues related to illegal drug production and use. The Consortium aims to promote objective and open debate on the effectiveness, direction and content of drug policies at national and international level, and supports evidence-based policies that are effective in reducing drug-related harm. It produces briefing papers, disseminates the reports of its member organisations, and offers expert consultancy services to policy makers and officials around the world.