

IDPC ADVOCACY NOTE

THE HIGH LEVEL SEGMENT OF THE 2009 COMMISSION ON NARCOTIC DRUGS

CIVIL SOCIETY ENGAGEMENT: STILL NOT GOOD ENOUGH

The International Drug Policy Consortium (IDPC) is a global network of NGOs 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 occasional briefing papers, disseminates the reports of its member organizations about particular drug-related matters, and offers expert consultancy services to policymakers and officials around the world.

Over the years, United Nations agencies and Commissions have developed a wide range of mechanisms for involving representatives of civil society in multilateral and intergovernmental discussions and decision-making processes. The UN system recognises the added perspective and value that is brought to policy debate by non-governmental organisations and those populations most affected by the policies under discussion. There are many examples of good practice in this regard - for example the Programme Co-ordinating Board of UNAIDS actually includes members that represent NGOs, and gives them equal status to government representatives in decision-making. Another example is the UN Development Programme, where they have created a civil society advisory committee that is fully involved with the senior management of the agency in discussions on all aspects of strategy and implementation.

Drug policy has always been a sensitive issue for national governments and international agencies alike, so there has been a reluctance to open the policy making process to meaningful civil society engagement, often assuming that it will consist solely of negative comments. This has been a great shame, as civil society in this field encompasses a wide range of bodies – service providers, community organisations, parents and family groups, networks of users and growers, and professional associations – that have a wide range of ‘grass roots’ experience and knowledge, and an enthusiasm to help in the search for more effective policy. This range of organisations will not always agree with each other, nor always agree with governments, but they have an important role to play in connecting the high level diplomatic and political debates to the reality on the ground.

For many years, the level of civil society engagement in CND debates has been limited by the lack of a strong mechanism for such involvement, and the limited level of awareness amongst NGOs around the world of the CND, and its implications. The review process leading up to this high level segment has been different – for the first time, a properly structured programme of NGO engagement has been put in place through the ‘Beyond 2008’ initiative. This project, funded by the European Commission and a small number of member states, has worked over a period of 2 years to bring together thousands of representatives of civil society from around

the world to discuss the impact of the drug control system in their country, and to agree recommendations to put forward to the CND. Nine regional seminars were held through the first half of 2008, and 300 delegates drawn from these events gathered in Vienna in July 2008 to put together a consensus declaration for presentation to the CND.

Despite significant differences of background and perspective, this gathering of NGOs was able to agree a set of shared principles and proposals, the fruit of several months of hard work by all involved. The secretariat of the Beyond 2008 initiative then summarised these principles and proposals into a conclusions document that was distributed to all members of the CND, and followed up with a formal letter to the Chairwoman of the CND suggesting ways that civil society could make a constructive contribution to the 2009 CND and its High Level Segment.

From this high point in late 2008, when the expectations of the civil society organisations were at their highest, our experience has been deeply disappointing:

- There has been very little discussion or recognition of the conclusions of the Beyond 2008 process in the series of meetings held since October to negotiate the political declaration to be adopted at this high level meeting, and many of the key 'Beyond 2008' conclusions are directly contradicted in the text of the declaration.
- Neither the Chairwoman, the CND secretariat, nor the CND bureau, has paid even the basic respect to the Beyond 2008 organisers and participants of providing an official reply to their letter. Civil society has therefore been left to deduce the approach being taken to the requests made in the letter, but it is clear that several of these requests have simply been ignored:
- The letter formally requested the organisation of a civil society hearing in the margins of the CND, where representatives of the Beyond 2008 could present their conclusions and perspectives to interested government delegations. The Chairwoman and secretariat never replied to this request, and took no action to even discuss this possibility with member states.
- The letter requested that a space be created at the HLS for a civil society 'marketplace' in the venue for the HLS, where NGOs could display materials on their work. Once again, no official response was given to this request, and no facility has been provided for this purpose.
- The letter requested the maximum possible participation of NGO speakers in the plenary and panel sessions of the High Level Segment. While it is recognised that space and time in these sessions is under severe pressure, we consider that a single 5 minute Beyond 2008 presentation to the plenary, and two NGO seats in each of the panel sessions, do not represent a serious commitment of the CND organisers to meaningful dialogue with civil society.

It is not only the secretariat, Chairwoman and Bureau that we feel let down by – any member state could at any point in the process have pushed for a more inclusive approach to civil society but, apart from a few notable exceptions, none have spoken out.

Through 2008, a wide range of civil society organisations felt truly included for the first time in the workings of the CND, and reacted to what then seemed to be a genuine welcome by working hard to present carefully thought through advice and recommendations. Events since have shown that there is still a long way to go if the CND is to catch up with the standards set by other UN commissions and agencies in providing meaningful mechanisms for respectful and constructive engagement with civil society.