

IDPC ADVOCACY NOTE

THE UNITED NATIONS DRUG POLICY REVIEW, SUPPLY REDUCTION WORKING GROUP

The International Drug Policy Consortium (IDPC) is a global network of NGOs and professional networks that specialise in issues related to illegal drugs. 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 and take a development-oriented and rights-based approach. 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.

BACKGROUND

In 1998, the world community gathered in New York for a United Nations General Assembly Special Session (UNGASS) to review and strengthen the global drug control system. The outcome of that meeting, attended by political leaders from over 180 countries, was a political declaration that committed member states to work together towards “eliminating or reducing significantly the illicit cultivation of the coca bush, the cannabis plant and the opium poppy by the year 2008,” as well as “eliminating or significantly reducing the illicit manufacture, marketing and trafficking of psychotropic substances, including synthetic drugs, and the diversion of precursors,” and “achieving significant and measurable results in the field of demand reduction.” The UNGASS also agreed a series of action plans designed to meet those objectives, and agreed to conduct a high-level review of progress and achievements after 10 years. It is this 10-year review that is currently being conducted by member states and the lead UN agency, the Vienna-based United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC).

When member states gathered in March at the 2008 Commission on Narcotic Drugs (CND), they held a two-day thematic debate on the extent to which the objectives set in 1998 had been met, and the challenges that remain. While this debate fell some way short of a comprehensive review of the experience of the last 10 years, many of the government and UN speeches recognised that the hoped-for significant reductions in the supply of, and demand for, controlled drugs had not been achieved, and that new challenges had emerged that should be given more prominence within international agreements and action plans. At the 2008 CND, a process for completing the review, and for mapping out a way forward for the global drug control system, was agreed – culminating in a high-level political meeting to be held in Vienna in March 2009.

THE PROCESS

Member States have agreed that five working groups will be established, that will consider progress related to each of the action plans agreed in 1998. These working groups will cover, respectively:

- Supply reduction (manufacturing and trafficking); 23-25 June 2008 (3 days)
- Countering money-laundering and promoting judicial cooperation; 30 June-2 July 2008 (2 ½ days)
- International cooperation on the eradication of illicit crops and on alternative development; 2-4 July 2008 (2 ½ days)
- Drug demand reduction; 15-17 September 2008 (2 ½ days)
- Control of precursors and Amphetamine-Type Stimulants; 17-19 September 2008 (2 ½ days)

These groups will meet just once, and are open to all UN member state governments. NGOs cannot attend the working groups, but non-governmental experts can be included in any member state’s delegation to the meetings. Each working group will debate the contents of a discussion document produced by the UNODC, and will seek to bring forward proposed text on their specialist area by October 2008 for discussion at a series of intersessional meetings of the CND. In turn, these intersessional meetings will aim to bring forward materials for agreement at

the political meeting in March 2009. While the final format of the outcome of that meeting is yet to be decided, it is likely that the focus will be on a political declaration. The outcome of the working groups is therefore crucial, and NGOs can influence this process by bringing forward ideas for the groups that cover their area of interest, and encouraging government delegates to introduce (and fight for) humane and effective policies and programmes to be incorporated into the forward programme. This note concentrates on the proceedings of the working group on supply reduction, which will meet in Vienna from 23rd to 25th June 2008.

WHAT TO ADVOCATE FOR

The Supply Reduction working group will be considering progress over the last 10 years in reducing the global supply of controlled drugs. The World Drug Report 2007, and the papers produced for the thematic debate at the 2008 Commission on Narcotic Drugs, all acknowledge that the objective of a significant reduction in the scale of global illegal markets has not been achieved. The UNODC, instead, claims that global markets are being ‘contained’ at levels of use well below those that would exist if supply reduction efforts were relaxed, or if controlled drugs were made legally available.

In his conference room paper at the 2008 CND (CRP 17 - ‘Fit for purpose’), Executive Director Antonio Costa goes on to acknowledge the problem of unintended consequences of the drug control system:

- The existence of a huge, and highly profitable, criminal black market, which adds to the power and reach of organized crime, and undermines public institutions through corruption.
- Policy displacement – the concentration of political and financial resources on supply reduction measures, sometimes to the detriment of health and development programmes.
- Geographical displacement – the negative effects resulting from the ‘balloon effect’, whereby criminal activity moves and changes shape in response to enforcement activity.

To these problems, we would add a significant other – that the implementation of the global control system often involves the demonization and stigmatization of drug users as a threat to society, and undeserving of the rights and protections of ‘law abiding’ citizens. This characterization of hundreds of millions of people is discriminatory and leads to a multitude of injustices and human rights abuses against people who use drugs.

At best, therefore, the global drug control system can claim to be ‘keeping the lid on’ the scale of the illegal market, while aspects of its implementation are producing significant consequential costs and problems for communities and governments. It is crucial that these realities and challenges are acknowledged and tackled head on in this review.

IDPC members and supporters should therefore take any opportunity to encourage government delegates to the Supply Reduction working group to call for:

- 1 A clear articulation of the fact that the 1998 objectives of a significant reduction in cultivation and supply have not been achieved, and that future objectives should be based on the containment of the scale of illegal markets, and minimising their negative consequences, rather than their eradication.
- 2 An examination of ways of minimising these negative consequences of a ‘contained’ market, that will continue to involve hundreds of millions of users, and billions of dollars in profits for organised crime.
- 3 A re-focusing of supply reduction objectives away from process indicators (for example hectares eradicated, or drugs seized), and towards outcome indicators (such as the level of corruption and violent crime associated with drug markets, the achievement of public health goals, or measures of social and economic development).
- 4 Greater involvement of other UN agencies (for example UNDP, World Bank) in the creation and implementation of drug control strategies at the global level, and in affected areas.
- 5 Greater involvement of UNODC and INCB in identifying and criticizing governments who breach human rights standards, or the ‘principle of proportionality’ in their pursuit of drug control objectives.
- 6 Re-focusing of UNODC support to member states in the law enforcement field, towards helping them find a balance between efforts to reduce the scale of the illegal market, and efforts to reduce the negative consequences of that market.

Further details, and relevant reports and analysis, on the 10-year review can be found on a special section of the IDPC website (www.idpc.info) or on a website created by TNI (www.ungassondrugs.org). If you have any questions or comments on this advocacy note, send them to IDPC at mt@internationaldrugpolicy.net.