



## **Regional consensus on the need for prompt and concrete actions in addressing drug: "In the rhetoric of the paradigm shift to transit to concrete actions"**

"In the rhetoric of the paradigm shift to transit to concrete actions". With this summary the IV Latin American conference on Drug Policy concluded.

The meeting gathered more than forty experts, specialists, governmental officials, coca farmers, growers and drug users from around the world who, approaching the issue from various axes, converged on the relevance of the specific changes within drug policy, considering a focus on harm reduction as well as the new strategies emerging in the region that promote a more humanistic approach on drugs.

Coincidentally with the debate sponsored by the conference, the Colombian president joined his Guatemalan counterpart Otto Perez Molina and former presidents, as well as outstanding personalities of science, art and culture, to reassert and remind throughout a letter the failure of the strategy known as "war on drugs", which focuses on repression and prohibition. The conference took place at the city of Bogotá, gathered over 600 attendants at the Town Hall, on December 5th and 6th.

The IV Conference on Drug Policy was sponsored by the Mayor of Bogotá, the Ministry of Health and Social Protection of the Republic of Colombia, the Ministry of Justice and Law of the Republic of Colombia, International Drug Policy Consortium (IDPC) and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC).

On the first day, the Mayor of Bogota Gustavo Petro emphasized: "There is a correlation between violence and a particular style of drug policy. The drug prohibition has built some illicit trade routes that can only grow powerfully by the extermination of human beings. The correlate of drug prohibition is the massacre"

The opening ceremony also had speeches from Bo Mathiesen, head of the UN Office on Drugs and Crime in Colombia (UNODC), Farid Samir Benavides Vanegas, Vice minister of Criminal Policy and Restorative Justice of the Ministry of Justice and Law in Colombia, Coletta Youngers, representative of the International Drug Policy Consortium (IDPC), Julian Quintero, Director of the Corporation Acción Técnica Social (ATS) and local organizer of the meeting, and Graciela Touzé, president of Intercambios, regional organizer of the Conference.

When explaining the reasons for holding the IV Conference, Touzé said: "We want to promote a debate and make use of the democratic right to disagree with the dominant discourses and practices in the field of drugs. And we want to make use of this right with the intent of changing a reality that makes us feel uncomfortable and hurts us".

Meanwhile, Julian Quintero, director of the Corporation Acción Técnica Social (ATS) of Colombia, host organization of the meeting, said: "We are not here to discuss the failure of the war on drugs that we all know already, but to concentrate on how will we can change this paradigm".

## **Social and economic development**

Which is the relationship between the phenomenon of drugs and the processes of development in the region? What policies have been developed to deal with the problem? How do different stakeholders measure the effects? Those were some of the questions with which Tom Blickman, researcher of the Drugs and Democracy Programme of the Transnational Institute (TNI) of the Netherlands, introduced the Drug and socioeconomic development panel.

Javier Gonzales Skaric, technical secretary of the Observatory of Crops Declared Illicit (OCI) from Bolivia, reinforced the importance of "generating processes of inclusion of organizations and social movements of peasants and indigenous people as true partners with their local governments, national and international organizations."

Meanwhile, Guillermo Garcia Miranda, Head of the Alternative Development Program at the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) in Colombia, said that "the most effective, efficient and sustainable mechanism for eradication is development".

At this axis, Fabiola Piñacue Achicué, founder and legal representative of Coca Nasa and member of the Andean Council of Coca Growers of Colombia, noted how through Coca Nasa "we seek to create an alternative to be able to reach our products to each of the Colombians. The strength to continue dignifying the coca leaf is up to us. The coca leaf is part of our geography. What the Plan Colombia does is demonize the coca"

Another area of discussion was health in relation to drugs. In that sense, Juan Carlos Celis, president of the Colombian Foundation Procrear said "it is impossible to imagine a world without drugs. For that reason, treatments should not have as its starting point the user abstinence. The State must provide the means to diminish harm of consumption as much as possible. "

He explained that what should be done is to "move from a position based on a policy of 'rehabilitation of addicted' to another one that encourages the active participation of the community, organizations and citizens to change the relation of users with drugs."

Meanwhile, Hugo Cohen, Mental Health subregional advisor for South America of the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO/WHO) emphasized the deficit in terms of health care: "There is no adequate training for health professionals to assist problematic drug use. A person accesses the right to care only when having the possibility of choosing: if the only options are the psychiatric hospital or the streets, people cannot exercise their right. The challenge is to create new services in terms of care to enable people to choose."

Also, the functioning of Drug Consumption Rooms which were implemented in the past two decades in countries like Germany, Australia, Canada, Spain, Luxembourg, Norway, the Netherlands and Switzerland were analyzed.

The facilities "are accepted by their target groups (vulnerable populations), communities and other key stakeholders, help to improve the health status of people who use drugs, reduce high-risk behaviors, can reduce the number of deaths caused by overdose and have an impact on rates of HIV and hepatitis C, although further evidence is required to demonstrate this effect", said Marie Nougier, Head of Research and Publications of the International Drug Policy Consortium (IDPC).

In his turn, Aldemar Parra Espitia, Coordinator of the area of reduction of psychoactive substances consumption of the Ministry of Health and Social Protection of the Republic of Colombia, spoke about the current situation in his country: "while Colombia is always talked about as producer, it is also a consumer country. Being seen as a country whose only relationship with drugs is the production has been a stigma that prevents seeing that there is also consumption here".

## **Human Rights**

During the roundtable about Drugs and Human Rights, the speakers were categorical. "Less talk and more action that include and respect human rights, but not as interesting rhetoric but as an effective implementation", claimed Pablo Abarca, consultant in Gender, Rights, Cultural Diversity and Bioethics of the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO/WHO).

"The right to health exists and is set, but how we make it operative? What's the point of saying that users with problematic consumption have the right to be welcomed and cared for, if we do not have the way to make it operative,, if there are no places where such care can be carried out?", he said.

Abarca explained that when the objectives of drug control agencies get in conflict with the human rights, these last ones must prevail, "but that is something that is written on paper and is not used", he said.

Also, Wagner Coutinho Alves, a member of the Latin American Network of People Who Use Drugs (LANPUD) and secretary of the Association of Social Studies of the use of psychoactive substances (ABESUP) of Brazil participated on that roundtable. "We need to have effective participation in the development of policies aimed to people who use drugs. When there is consciousness about what drugs mean to people, policies could be adapted to respect our dignity", he said.

Meanwhile, another of the participants of this roundtable, Daniel Wolfe, director of the International Harm Reduction Program of the Open Society Foundation, questioned "the convenient myth that many of us say to ourselves that is sufficient to treat drugs as a public health problem and not as a criminal problem. We repeat it as if that was enough. We say that people need treatment, but we avoid the question of what treatment means.

Wolfe remembered that this means not only accessibility or availability, but also not to be tortured, not to be humiliated, to be entitled to privacy and confidentiality, the right to life. "Many people die in centers operating under the treatment flag, of compassion, of a better

approach to drug policy", he said.

Oscar Parés Franquero, collaborator of the General sub department of drug dependency of the Public Health Agency of Catalonia, Spain, proposes to recover the vulnerability paradigm, "which allows us not to see as inevitable the harms of consumption. If we join vulnerability and human rights we do that whole society gets involved and not just professionals working with certain groups".

During the second day of the Conference, Guillermo Alfonso Jaramillo Martinez, Secretary of Health of the Bogotá City Hall was among the first speakers, who said "We must implement comprehensive policies that include harm reduction. A drug policy without harm reduction is not comprehensive".

Jaramillo Martinez remarked that "the State has as ethical mandate the guarantee of human dignity, and the restitution, to the citizens of vulnerable and violated rights. We should not hide the problems; we must make them visible and act. Our president understands that we must deal with the problem. The solution is legalization. We must move beyond the policies promoted by the United States, based on repression, which have cost us many deaths".

In her turn, Lumena Almeida Castro Furtado, Adjunt Secretary of Health and Coordinator of the Care Policy in the Alcohol and Drugs Network of the Municipality of Sao Bernardo do Campo, Brazil, emphasized that "we must recognize the territory in which the services are inserted. Walking the streets, meet local leaders and connect social organizations. For us the association with social movements is very important. All this helps us to get people out of the vulnerable situation".

Also Iván Fornís Espinosa, Senior Technician of the management of the drug analysis service of Energy Control, Spain, and Liz Evans executive director and founder of PHS Community Services Society – Insite, Vancouver, Canada, participated of this panel. Insite is the only injection site in North America, she said, expressing satisfaction because after many obstacles they had to overcome to get it running, "the people of our community have a higher life expectancy than 10 years ago". After a first stage where it generated a lot of resistance in most of the population, "people changed their minds and began to see it as a community service. Finally, it was supported by all three levels of government and by local police".

During the roundtable about legal and regulatory frameworks for drug problems, Pedro Vieira Abramovay, Professor of Law at the Getulio Vargas Foundation in Rio de Janeiro and Avaaz campaign director, said that in 2006 in Brazil the law was amended in order to "remove imprisonment for possession of illicit drugs, and this was well received by the population. However, it didn't have the desired effects, because detainees for that reason increased".

"What happened?" asked the panelist. "The Brazilian law has a major shortcoming, it is not clear establishing the difference between the definitions of the offense of possession with the crime of trafficking," he replied. And he said that "many consumers go to jail as traffickers. Today sixty percent of the imprisoned people for trafficking have no previous criminal record".

Another panelist, John Walsh, Principal Coordinator of the Andes and of the Drug Policy Programs of the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA), of the United States, told

how recently "citizens of Washington and Colorado voted for regulation and legalization, having the support of both parties. It was not a vote of fans of marijuana". In that sense, "what is clear is that U.S. attitudes are changing. And the support of young people is broader than in older sectors".

Meanwhile, Julieta Lemaitre Ripoll, Associate Professor, Faculty of Law, University of Los Andes in Colombia, said that while today in her country there is no penalty for possession for personal consumption, "the police criterion for arresting is still because of the intention, according to the face, or send him to a psychiatrist to determine if the person is addicted or not".

"When the police finds these kids in the street, stops them and according to their face, takes away or not the drug and takes them to a temporary detention. The police do not take people they estimate are of higher social strata", she said.

For Lemaitre Ripoll, "the political correlate and practice are different, as there is certain libertarian tinge in the policy, in practice there is still much to do".

Moreover, Oscar Gomez da Trindade, Vice Minister of Education and Culture and a permanent member of the National Drug Board of the Republic of Uruguay, described that in Uruguay they work "hard on harm reduction, education, construction of social networking and seeking dialogue with civil society and organizations of drug users".

The official said that "what is happening in Uruguay in drug policy has a high component of democracy. Because we understand that it is a responsibility of the Executive, to regulate the production of cannabis. "

## **Violence and security**

Edgar Gutiérrez Girón, Guatemalan Ambassador on Special Mission for the reform of drug policy, emphasized how drug trafficking and inefficient policies are a threat to the viability of the democratization and development of Guatemala because they are "a significant source of violence and sacrifice of human lives", as "the number of murders in Guatemala in the last decade has tripled". The other reason has to do with "preventing a sense of normalcy to rebuild the institutions of the Rule of Law".

Meanwhile, Alejandro Hope, the developer of MC2 project "Less Crime, Less Punishment", a joint initiative on public safety of the Mexican Institute for Competitiveness (IMCO), said that "we must rethink the background situation, eradication doesn't work". He also emphasized that "interdiction policies have been pushing the phenomenon to vulnerable areas". In that line, journalist Socorro Ramirez also said "not only prohibitionist policy is causing more damage than the problem, but there has also been a double standard in the application of drug policies that has caused that damage, and the catastrophic consequences, have fallen on the most vulnerable segments".

## **Social Inclusion**

Ruano, director of PASSOS, Training and Education Center, in El Salvador noted: "humanize the drug policy is to humanize the lives of people who use drugs, is to include them". In that line, Cesare Cattini, Director of the Social and Formative Foundation "Noah's Ark" of

Colombia, emphasized that "for us, the person should be at the center of each intervention. The essential thing is to ask what is best for the subjects of our intervention, not to judge them, and empower them".

Susan Fergusson, advisor on issues of organization of community services at the Ministry of Health and Social Protection, Colombia, was also on the same line. "Our practices must aim to reduce inequality and to have sustainability of the processes".

## **Seminar and Awards**

Within the framework of the Conference the II Seminar for Journalists on Drug Policy was also carried out, attracting 25 journalists from eleven countries in the region, and took place the day before the conference.

Also, on the first day the three best journalistic works within the framework of the Latin American journalism Award on Drugs were delivered. The jury consisted of Andrea Dominguez, from the organization Viva Rio in Brazil, Carlos Eduardo Huertas, editor of *Semana* magazine in Colombia and Guillermo Osorno, director of *Gatopardo*, Mexico.

The first prize was for Virginia Messi of Argentina's *Clarín* newspaper, the second for Humberto Padgett Leon, from *Emeequis* Magazine, Mexico, and the third prize went to Hudson Correa and Leonardo Souza, from the *Epoca* Magazine Editora *Globo*, Brazil.

## **Satellite events**

At the same time that different Panels were conducted, the conference was also a meeting place for other actors. The meeting of Latin American young activists who work to reform the drug policy, had the purpose of exchanging experiences in the field. "We, young Latin Americans gathered at this conference, want to change the current paradigm of prohibitionist drug policies that exist worldwide, as we are the main victims experiencing violence and exclusion. We understand that we are the main agents of social change, and we seek for the guarantee of participation in this transformation of the public policies on drugs, on part of the national governments and regional organizations", issued through a statement.

It was also the case of those who gathered to discuss about the crops declared illicit. Representatives of social organizations from different regions of Colombia, international NGO representatives, experts and researchers showed concern about "the stark contrast between the deterioration of the socio-economic situation, of peace and security, and environmental balance that happens in the territories, catalogued in a criminalizing way as 'cocaleros' (coca-growing)". In this regard, the implementation of a National Meeting of Producers of Crops Declared Illegal in Colombia, was convened for the first half of 2013 as part of the efforts to create spaces of participation for the organized communities.

Meanwhile, the Latin American Network of People Who Use Drugs (LANPUD) was also present emphasizing how these spaces, as the Conference, "increasingly need the leading role of drug users, so that the main problem of drugs in the region -the marginalization and inequality of rights between individuals and people- can be put into focus".

Also the Latin American Coalition of cannabis activists participated stressing: "Our basic demands are the self-cultivation and the Cannabis Social Clubs. We support measures that

separate the cannabis from illegal markets and suggest its regulation through nonprofit mechanisms", they argued.

## **Conclusions**

In this conference some of the orientations of drug policy became clear: "A policy that protects and encourages economic development of farmers and peasants instead of chasing and imprisoning them, a policy that prioritize their access to land ownership, promote economic prosperity and respect the traditional use of the coca leaf", said Pablo Cymerman, coordinator of the Organizing Committee of the IV Conference and member of Intercambios Civil Association.

In terms of consumption care, it was suggested that treatments can't have abstinence as a starting point, and that a drug policy without harm reduction is not comprehensive. The experiences already exist. Alternatives with drug users' involvement to define public policies, social promotion actions, community involvement and regulated consumption rooms, among others were presented in this conference.

Until now, all the speeches call to respect the rights of users. We need less talk and more action in this field: the people who use illicit drugs often face situations of discrimination, rejection and violence, imprisonment, torture and violent compulsive treatments that increase their suffering rather than promote health and quality of life. In this sense, Cymerman said: "In drug policy it is no longer enough to talk about human rights, we need to take action. We hope to have moved from the rhetoric to the paradigm change towards concrete actions that help to build the new paradigm we are demanding. That is our dream and we will go on to make it happen".