

The Human Rights Council asserts its role in drug policy

Introduction

On 8 October 2025, the UN Human Rights Council (HRC) adopted Resolution 60/26, 'The human rights implications of drug policy'.¹ The resolution – tabled by Colombia on behalf of a cross-regional Core Group composed of Albania, Brazil, Colombia, Greece, Guatemala, Portugal, Uruguay and Switzerland – was adopted without a vote,² and supported by 35 co-sponsors.³

The objective of the resolution was threefold: firstly, to assert the role of the HRC to engage in the human rights dimension of drug policy debates in its own right, instead of contributing to processes taking place in Vienna or New York; secondly, to strengthen the mandate of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) in providing guidance and recommendations on how to better align drug policies with human rights instruments; and thirdly, to consolidate and expand human rights language in relation to drug policy.

In a way, all three objectives were achieved. This advocacy outlines and analyses the strategic importance of Resolution 60/26 and its implications for the future of drug policy.

Asserting the role of the Human Rights Council in global drug policy

Resolution 60/26 is the fourth HRC resolution dedicated to drug policy and human rights. The first one was adopted in 2015 in the lead up to

the 2016 UNGASS on drugs.⁴ The second, from 2018, aimed to contribute to the 2019 Ministerial Segment on drugs in Vienna (focusing on the implementation of the UNGASS Outcome Document's operational recommendations on human rights).⁵ The third resolution in 2023 fed into the 2024 mid-term review of the 2019 Ministerial Declaration on drugs.⁶

This time, the objective was to separate the work of the HRC from processes taking place outside of Geneva, and to assert the independent role of the Council to address the human rights dimension of drug policy.

The rationale for the resolution is set out in preambular paragraphs 15, 17 and 19. Together, they convey a clear message: that the Council has the mandate to promote universal respect for human rights; and drug policies – given their significant human rights implications (see Box 1) – fall squarely within that mandate. The preamble also states that the HRC should promote the effective coordination and mainstreaming of human rights within the UN system. This is a useful reminder to Vienna that the Council is ready to take leadership on the human rights dimension of drug policy.

As was to be expected, this was met with resistance from various Member States, fearing that this might weaken the roles of the UN Commission on Narcotic Drugs (CND) and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) – and therefore undermine the international drug control regime. Countries like Algeria, China, Cuba

Box 1 The devastating human rights implications of drug policy

The extent of the human rights costs of punitive drug policies is daunting. A staggering 2.6 million drug use-related deaths were reported between 2016 and 2021 alone (2021 being the latest data point for drug use-related deaths globally).⁷ The risk of acquiring HIV is 34 times higher for people who inject drugs than for the wider population,⁸ while one in two people who inject drugs are living with hepatitis C. And yet, the policy approach towards drug use remains overwhelmingly focused on criminalisation and punishment, instead of care and support. As a result, one in 12 of the 64 million people estimated to have a drug dependence have access to treatment,⁹ while harm reduction services remain severely restricted and chronically underfunded.¹⁰

Punitive drug policies also continue to be a major driver of incarceration and prison overcrowding, with one in five people currently in prison – or approximately 2.5 million people worldwide – being incarcerated for a drug offence. This proportion increases to one in three for women deprived of liberty globally.¹¹

Strategies to reduce coca cultivation have relied on forced eradication campaigns and the use of harmful herbicides that have polluted land, rivers, and resulted in serious health harms for local populations, while exacerbating poverty and violence.¹²

The death penalty continues to be used for drug-related offences; of all known executions in 2024, 42% were carried out for drugs.¹³

Furthermore, from 2016 to 2025, several countries launched anti-drug campaigns that resulted in the killing of hundreds of people suspected of using drugs or of being involved in other drug-related activities – most notably in the Philippines, but also in Afghanistan, Brazil, Colombia, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Lebanon, Kenya, Thailand and Sri Lanka.¹⁴ More recently, the resurgence of the “narcoterrorism” narrative has also justified extrajudicial killings by the USA in the Caribbean Sea and Eastern Pacific Ocean.¹⁵

At the same time, drug control continues to justify arbitrary arrests and detention, widespread violence and discrimination.¹⁶

UN human rights bodies have repeatedly sounded the alarm over the human rights impacts of drug policy. Since 2022, over 20 Special Procedures from the HRC have called for an end to the global ‘war on drugs’.¹⁷ In 2023, High Commissioner Volker Türk emphasized that:

‘Human rights ought to be central to all policies that tackle the world’s drug problem. Currently, this is far from the case – and I encourage the Council to continue ramping up its engagement on these topics, and to infuse a human rights dimension in all fora where these issues are addressed’.

and Russia all delivered statements to that effect as the resolution was adopted. This was also one of the key arguments brought forward by Singapore and other delegations as the text was being negotiated.

It should be noted that, as Singapore was questioning the resolution in Geneva, the country was being internationally criticised for executing Malaysian national Pannir Selvam a/l Pranthaman for a drug offence back home.¹⁹ At the same time, the USA authorised military strikes on civilian boats off the coast of Venezuela on suspicion

of drug trafficking – which have resulted in the killing of at least 150 people as of 27 February 2026.²⁰ These attacks were widely criticised by civil society,²¹ UN human rights experts²² and the INCB.²³

These two examples of blatant human rights abuses and violations of international law committed in the name of ‘drug control’ served to further underline the urgency of more systematically elevating drug policy as a critical human rights issue in Geneva.

In fact, in his presentation of the resolution on the day of its adoption, the Colombian Ambassador strongly condemned the USA: ‘The radical application of drug policies conceived as a war plan has led us to witness extrajudicial executions in the Caribbean Sea, in full view of the whole world. There is no justification for drug policies that violate human rights or international humanitarian law, even when a State turns its actions into an act of war’. ‘This item should remain on the Council’s agenda’, Colombia continued, as ‘it is essential for supporting States in their commitment to designing drug policies that are more humane, more efficient and more respectful of the rights of all persons’.²⁴

Various Member States from Europe and Latin America supported the resolution as it was adopted. While African countries remained mostly silent during the proceedings, Ethiopia made a welcome intervention aligning itself with the ‘aspirations of this resolution to ensure that drug policy is designed and implemented in a manner that upholds human rights, public health, dignity, equality and non-discrimination’.

In the end, the resolution included two key operative paragraphs. The first one encouraged the OHCHR ‘and relevant international human rights mechanisms to continue, within their respective mandates, to share their contribution to addressing the human rights implications of drug policies with the Commission on Narcotic Drugs’. The second decided that the Human Rights Council would ‘remain seized of the matter’.²⁵ In line with these commitments, when the resolution was introduced to all Member States in the informal negotiations, Colombia and the Core Group announced that they intended this to be a recurring resolution that would come to the HRC periodically, every two or three years.

This is the strongest acknowledgement of the role of the UN human rights system in drug policy to date, and an unequivocal commitment for it to be more systematically involved. It is an important recognition of the ground-breaking work on drug policy done by the OHCHR and human rights mechanisms in recent years, including on harm reduction,²⁶ punitive measures,²⁷ torture prevention,²⁸ and arbitrary detention.²⁹

While it has often been challenging to recognise this work in past resolutions, as some Member States feared this would undermine the UNODC’s and CND’s mandates, Resolution 60/26 explicitly encourages improved cooperation between the OHCHR and UNODC as a means to enhance system-wide coherence. The resolution also urges human rights mechanisms to continue examining the human rights implications of drug policy. The next step will be for the CND to better recognise the important contributions of UN entities outside Vienna with mandates on human rights – an overdue development.

Recognising the role of the OHCHR in drug policy discussions

The second objective of the resolution was to provide a standing mandate to the OHCHR to draft periodic reports on specific aspects of drug policy. This would enable the Office to provide regular and more in-depth analyses of the human rights implications of various facets of drug policy, highlight examples of best practice, and propose concrete guidance on rights-oriented policies.

This was a highly contentious topic during the negotiations, with countries such as Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Peru, Russia, Saudi Arabia and Singapore strongly rejecting the periodic nature of OHCHR reports. In the end, the final draft only retained the request for the OHCHR to produce one report, focusing on the ‘impacts of drug policies on the rights of women and girls’.³⁰

Interestingly, and in contrast with the negotiations of the previous resolutions on drugs, no Member State objected to the production of a new OHCHR report on the human rights implications of drug policy, nor to the organisation of a panel discussion at the Council. In previous years, such proposals had been met with significant opposition from a small but vocal group of Member States, and led to the introduction of amendments to remove this request.³¹

This is a positive outcome. It shows that the OHCHR’s sustained work on drug policy issues and its presence at the CND and elsewhere have become much more widely accepted. The fact that the resolution was adopted without a vote is also a reflection of this.³²

As is frequent at the HRC, several Member States, among them China, Kuwait and Sudan, decided to ‘disassociate’ themselves from the contents of the resolution after its adoption by consensus. Sudan, for instance, disassociated itself from the paragraphs relating to women. Algeria and Cuba expressed their concerns over the resolution and their plans to restrict their interpretation and implementation of the resolution to the paragraphs aligned with their own national legislations.

Consolidating human rights language on drug policy

In terms of content, the resolution not only locks in key gains made in the 2023 drugs resolution, it also builds on them, expanding the scope and pushing for a broader, more inclusive view of how drug policy intersects with human rights.

Reiterating 2023 commitments on drugs

The resolution upholds the significant progress made in 2023 with regards to commitments to end racial discrimination in drug laws and practices, and to protect the rights of Indigenous Peoples to their traditional medicines and health practices. Notably, none of these elements were challenged during the negotiations. This highlights the added value of the human rights system compared to the CND, where issues like racial discrimination have never been addressed, and where Indigenous rights remain highly contested.³⁴

Consolidating language on harm reduction

The term ‘harm reduction’ – which appeared for the first time in the 2023 HRC resolution on

drugs – was not only retained but expanded from one paragraph to three. Seeking to remove the term from the text, Russia proposed Amendment L.55³⁵ which was rejected with 25 votes against, 10 in favour, and 12 abstentions (see Figure 1). In comparison, when a similar amendment was tabled in 2023 there were 23 votes against, 13 in favour, and 12 abstentions.³⁶ It should also be noted that, in comparison to 2023, no caveats were added to the harm reduction language. This represents small but meaningful shifts towards normalising the harm reduction approach as an essential component of the right to health.³⁷

A broader and more diverse understanding of human rights

Tabled by Colombia, the resolution was an opportunity to integrate substantive human rights issues particularly relevant to countries involved in illegal drug production – mostly located in the Global South. For the first time in a drug-related resolution, Resolution 60/26 recognises the ‘right to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment’ in designing drug policies, and calls for the adverse impacts on the environment to be mitigated, not only in reference to drug production and trafficking, but also to drug policy responses themselves.³⁸

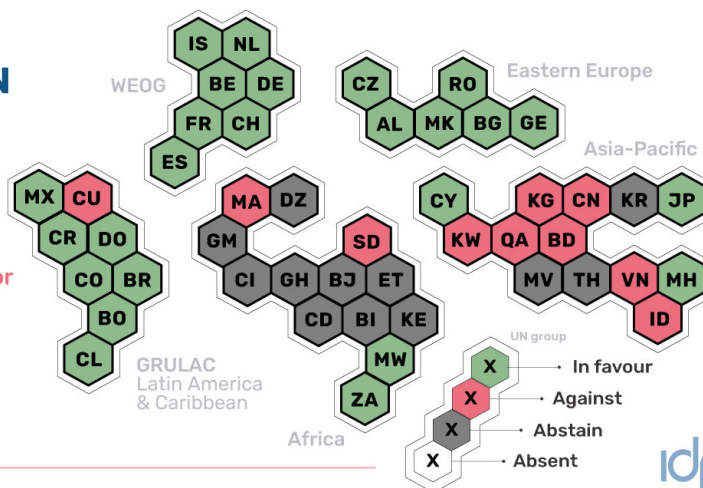
This is complemented by language on alternative development and emphasising the need to respect traditional uses and to take into consideration the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples when addressing cultivation.³⁹

These additions use language that has already

Figure 1. The devastating human rights implications of drug policy

PRO-RIGHTS MAJORITY AFFIRMS HARM REDUCTION IN REBUTTAL OF RUSSIA'S MANOEUVERING

Russia's attempts to weaken the resolution through amendments backfired. **A proposal to remove ‘harm reduction’ from the resolution, for instance, was defeated with 23 votes against, 10 in favour and 12 abstentions.** The outcome reaffirmed growing consensus on rights-based approaches and exposed Russia's waning influence within the Council.



been used in CND resolutions. Whilst this is not particularly innovative, it does help to place cultivating communities – a population historically overlooked in HRC resolutions – more firmly at the centre of human rights discussions. This was a particularly important point to make in the context of the critical review of the coca leaf by the World Health Organization, which disappointingly culminated with a recommendation to keep the plant in schedule I of the 1961 Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs⁴⁰ – another example of the disconnect between the drug control and human rights systems.⁴¹

Protecting civil society space

The 2023 resolution had emphasised the contribution of civil society and affected communities to all aspects of drug policy. The 2025 text takes a step further with the strongest language on civil society in relation to drug policy to date, calling on Member States to ‘create and maintain a safe and enabling environment to ensure that they can operate free from hindrance, insecurity and reprisals’.⁴²

This is particularly important given the ongoing repression that human rights, harm reduction and drug policy organisations are experiencing under the guise of ‘foreign agent’ and ‘drug propaganda’ laws, particularly in Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia.⁴³ The recent arbitrary suspension of two NGOs’ ECOSOC status by a member of the Committee on NGOs is also a worrying example of shrinking civic space at the UN.⁴⁴

Strengthening the gender perspective

In line with the request to the OHCHR to prepare a report on the implications of drug policy for women and girls, the resolution also introduces three new preambular paragraphs on gender. These call for: gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls; the promotion of gender-responsive drug policies including in relation to non-custodial measures for pregnant women and for women who are sole or primary caretakers; ensuring access to health services for women; and addressing gender-based violence.⁴⁵

As was the case for the new paragraphs on alternative development, the language largely borrows from other UN documents and does not

present major substantive innovations. Instead, the progress here is in giving more weight to gender in debates on the human rights dimension of drug policy.

Discarding stigmatising and confusing ‘drug-free’ language

Finally, the resolution reflects a gradual shift away from the unrealistic and stigmatising terminology that has long characterised UN texts. In a crucial development, this is the first HRC resolution on drugs that excludes the paragraph that has historically committed the international community to achieving a ‘society free of drug abuse’. In 2023, this language had been excluded from the draft proposed by the Core Group, but reintroduced through an amendment. This time around, in 2025, no amendment was proposed to reinsert the language into the text.

The goal of a drug-free world has long been used to justify policies that systematically violate human rights, so seeing it slowly disappear from UN resolutions is a welcome development: this language has already been removed from the 2022 and 2024 drugs ‘omnibus’ resolutions adopted at the UN General Assembly.⁴⁶ However, it remains a mainstay at the CND in Vienna.

In addition, the HRC adopts for the first time the formulation ‘individuals who use drugs’ instead of ‘individuals with drug use disorders’ in several paragraphs addressing the right to health, stigma and marginalisation, and HIV/AIDS, where the reference to ‘disorders’ was simply inaccurate. This change helps to dispel narratives that wrongly conflate the two groups.

Recommendations

Recommendations for Member State delegations in Geneva

- For the resolution to realise its full potential as a strategic instrument, it is essential that the Core Group remains committed to making it a recurring resolution by **tabling a new text at the HRC within the next two to three years**. During this interim period, the Core Group should closely monitor international and national developments to identify emerging issues and language that may warrant inclusion

in future iterations of the resolution.

- The Core Group, together with like-minded Member States, should **ensure that the human rights implications of drug policy remain firmly on the agenda of the Council**. This can be achieved through the organisation of side events, regular joint statements during HRC sessions, and sustained engagement with relevant special procedure mandate holders. Particular attention should be given to the presentation of the forthcoming OHCHR report on the human rights implications of drug policy for women and girls at the Council's 63rd session,⁴⁷ as well as the inter-sessional panel discussion to be held ahead of the 64th session. It is also expected that the Expert Mechanism to Advance Racial Justice and Equality in Law Enforcement will issue a thematic report on drug policy in 2026.⁴⁸
- In the implementation of these activities, the Core Group and like-minded Member States should continue efforts to **broaden cross-regional support for this agenda**. This includes proactive outreach to delegations from all regions, with a view to identifying and incorporating priorities and perspectives that align with, and strengthen, the overall effort to address the human rights implications of drug policy.
- The Core Group and like-minded Member States should adopt a **systematic approach to the human rights implications of drug policy at the Universal Periodic Review**. Member States are also encouraged to raise the human rights implications of drug policy in their own periodic country reviews with treaty bodies, where relevant.

Recommendations for Member State delegations in Vienna and New York

- **Welcome the HRC Resolution 60/26 in plenary statements at the CND, and in future drug 'omnibus' resolutions** at the UN General Assembly. Statements and upcoming resolutions in Vienna and New York should also welcome the work of the OHCHR and human rights mechanisms, particularly those that have recently issued thematic reports with a

focus on drug policy, such as the UN Special Rapporteur on the right to health, or the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention.

- Where appropriate, **propose language from HRC Resolution 60/26 during the negotiations of resolutions at the CND and the omnibus resolution at the UN General Assembly**. This is particularly relevant on issues such as harm reduction, racial discrimination, and civic space, where the value-added from the HRC resolution is very clear, as is the need to ensure consistency across UN fora. This will also allow for a broadening of the debate in Vienna and New York, and for the legitimisation and normalisation of the HRC resolution.
- Encourage the UNODC and the INCB, including via language in CND resolutions, to better collaborate with the OHCHR and human rights mechanisms, ensuring that the **UN speaks with one voice on a human rights-based approach to drug policy**, as promoted in the UN System Common Position on drugs.

Recommendations for civil society

- Ensure that **national-level authorities with mandates on drug policy or human rights are familiar with HRC Resolution 60/26** and with key language adopted by the Council on issues such as harm reduction and the right to health, gender equality, racial discrimination, civic space, or the right to a healthy environment, amongst others.
- **Contribute to upcoming thematic reports by the OHCHR and human rights mechanisms on topics relevant to drug policy**. This includes the forthcoming OHCHR report on the human rights implications of drug policy for women and girls requested by HRC Resolution 60/26 – with a deadline on 31 March.⁴⁹ It also includes the upcoming report dedicated to systematic racism against Africans and people of African descent in the enforcement of drug laws and policies by the Expert Mechanism to Advance Racial Justice and Equality in Law Enforcement – for which the deadline for inputs is 10 April.⁵⁰
- **Engage with UN human rights treaty bodies** through individual communications, infor-

mal briefings, or shadow reports when they conduct periodic reviews of your country. This builds their jurisprudence on the human rights implications of drug policy, and can serve as a window of opportunity for reform at national level.

- **Take part in your country's Universal Periodic Review** by submitting a shadow report and engaging with missions of like-minded countries to the HRC and to your own capital. The aim of this advocacy should be to encourage Member States to provide specific recommendations on the human rights implications of drug policy in your country; these could touch on issues such as the death penalty for drug offences, access to harm reduction, or the decriminalisation of people who use drugs.⁵¹
- **Advocate for likeminded delegations to promote a human rights-based approach to drugs at the CND and at the UN General Assembly.** This entails sensitising them on the human rights implications of drug policy and the breakthroughs made in Geneva, and urging them to explicitly welcome Resolution 60/26 and the work of the UN human rights system, and to incorporate language from HRC Resolution 60/26 in relevant resolutions.
- **Leverage the recommendations made by the UN human rights system** in thematic and country-specific reports for national-level advocacy. This would include raising awareness about such recommendations amongst relevant stakeholders in government, parliament, national human rights institutions and civil society, and calling on national authorities to implement key recommendations.

Recommendations

This advocacy note was drafted by Marie Nougier and Adria Cots Fernandez. Many thanks to Jamie Bridge, Teresa Castro and Michelle Mateus for their valuable comments and inputs.

Endnotes

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46. Nougier, M. (28 November 2024), 'The drugs omnibus resolution 2024: The cold war between "drug-free world" and "harm reduction"', *IDPC Blog*, <https://idpc.net/blog/2024/11/the-drugs-omnibus-resolution-2024-the-cold-war-between-drug-free-world-and-harm-reduction>
47. The call for contributions for the report is available here: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/calls-for-input/2026/call-inputs-ohchr-report-human-rights-implication-drug-policy>
48. See: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/calls-for-input/2026/call-inputs-systemic-racism-against-africans-and-people-african-descent>
49. See: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/calls-for-input/2026/call-inputs-ohchr-report-human-rights-implication-drug-policy>
50. See: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/calls-for-input/2026/call-inputs-systemic-racism-against-africans-and-people-african-descent>
51. For more information of how the UPR can be leveraged for drug policy reform, see: <https://hri.global/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/UPR-people-who-use-drugs-report-2019.pdf>; <https://inpu.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/INPUD-UPR-Technical-Guide.pdf>

About this advocacy note

This IDPC advocacy note outlines and analyses the strategic importance of Human Rights Council Resolution 60/26, and its implications for the future of drug policy.

About IDPC

The International Drug Policy Consortium is a global network of NGOs that come together to promote drug policies that advance social justice and human rights. IDPC's mission is to amplify and strengthen a diverse global movement to repair the harms caused by punitive drug policies, and to promote just responses.

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