



# DROGAS EN MOVIMIENTO NUEVAS PERSPECTIVAS

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## **A breath of fresh air on drug policy in the Americas: the recent debate at the CICAD**

**By: Coletta A. Youngers \***

The region's top drug policy officials came together in Washington, DC from April 29 to May 1 for a meeting of the Organization of American States' [Inter-American Drug Abuse Control Commission](#) (CICAD). Like the UN's Commission on Narcotic Drugs (CND), the bi-annual ritual has long been characterized by endless official speeches about what countries are doing to "combat the scourge" of illicit drugs. However, a slow evolution in the nature of these meetings was evident. An increase in the number of sessions focused on thematic issues and the inclusion of more independent experts in those sessions have made the meetings far more interesting. At times, a sense of meaningful discussion emerges. Yet the CICAD meetings continue to reflect the deep divisions within the hemisphere over drug policy reform issues, and the role that Latin America and the Caribbean will play in lead up to the 2016 UN Special Session on Drugs remains far from clear.

The most dramatic departure from past practice was the inclusion of the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) on the agenda, with James Cole, the Deputy Attorney General included in the opening session and DOJ official Jonathan Wroblewski on a panel on judicial reform and alternatives to incarceration. The CICAD session opened with what amounted to a "mea culpa" on the part of the U.S. government. Cole talked about how harsh sentencing laws have led to an unacceptable number of low-level drug offenders behind bars, the way in which increasing prison costs have drained resources from other law enforcement priorities and the resulting erosion in public confidence in the U.S. criminal justice system. He talked about how DOJ is working to reduce the number of low-level offenders behind bars through alternatives to incarceration and social reintegration programs, as well as a program to pardon hundreds if not thousands of low-level offenders; to redirect law enforcement resources to promote citizen security; and to promote broader sentencing reform. For the first time, the U.S. government – the main force behind the region's harsh drug laws – sent a powerful message on the need to restore fairness, proportionality and integrity to the criminal justice system as it relates to drug policy.

Perhaps because of the DOJ presence, the top U.S. drug official, William Brownfield, Assistant Secretary of State for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement, failed to make an appearance at this CICAD meeting (Brownfield's more traditional view of U.S. drug policy does not fully reflect the views espoused by the Justice Department). Indeed, the size of the U.S. delegation was surprisingly modest and in general its members took a non-interventionist approach. Canada, in contrast, has emerged as the enforcer of the drug policy status quo, vociferously opposing any deviation from a hardline, frontal attack on illicit drugs. Canada was backed by Peru, Panama, Venezuela and Nicaragua, among others, while Colombia, Mexico and Guatemala appear to be increasingly working together to promote debate on drug policy reforms. Though Ecuador joined that coalition at the last CND in Vienna, it had a low-level delegation in Washington. Uruguay of course remains out front on the cannabis issue.



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Indeed, a surprising amount of time was dedicated to cannabis; one entire afternoon of the three-day meeting. The first part focused on the potential negative consequences of marijuana use as put forward by Dr. Wilson Compton, Deputy Director at the U.S.-based National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA). However, that was followed by a more plural debate that began with a Skype presentation by the head of Uruguay's National Council on Drugs, Julio Calzada, followed by Barbara Brohl, the Director of the Colorado Department of Revenue, well-known academic Peter Reuter (another academic involved in the U.S. state of Washington's regulation initiative, Beau Kilmer, moderated the panel) and anti-cannabis crusader Kevin Sabet. What was most striking about this session was the response from the officials in attendance. With the exceptions of Canada and Mexico, rather than the normal speeches that tend to dominate the discussion period, officials seemed genuinely interested in learning about the nuts and bolts of cannabis regulation efforts and asked questions along those lines.

In contrast to cannabis, the issue that is always on the CICAD agenda is U.S.-modelled drug courts, as the U.S. and Canadian governments have pushed strongly for their expansion into Latin America. Critics point to a variety of problems with this approach, ranging from concerns that consumers caught with drugs are channeled into the criminal justice system to the high cost of such programs to the fact that in Latin America evidence-based treatment options are sorely lacking. Nonetheless, these views have not been aired in CICAD meetings; but that too has begun to change. For example, former interim Seattle Chief of Police Jim Pugel spoke about the LEAD program, which diverts dependent drug users and small-scale drug offenders directly into treatment and other social services. And most significantly, the government of Colombia – which presently holds the CICAD presidency -- has created a working group on alternatives to incarceration with a proposed agenda that includes decriminalization of drug use, proportionality in sentencing, and diversion programs more generally. The initiative holds the promise of broadening discussion of policy options beyond drug courts.

The next time the region's top drug policy officials will come together is for the OAS General Assembly Special Session on drug policy, as mandated in the Antigua Declaration signed last year. That meeting, at which foreign ministers should also participate, is set for September 19, timed to take place just before the UN General Assembly meeting. However, neither an agenda nor a clear strategy for influencing the UN meeting or UNGASS process has been put forward. While the regional debate on drug policy reform was clearly evident in the last CICAD meeting, how that debate will be played out in the international arena remains, for now, an enigma.

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