

Summary

Dutch drugs policy achieves its objective of limiting damage to the health of users. However, in some areas the policy is in urgent need of change:

- Use of drugs and alcohol by *minors* must be tackled far more rigorously. Research has shown that use of such substances by young people does them greater harm than was previously assumed. It is also important that we protect vulnerable young people, in particular, from developing the kinds of problem behaviour associated with these substances, and from social marginalisation.
- '*Coffee shops*' need to return to their original purpose: points of sale for local users (in order to keep the markets for soft and hard drugs separate), not large-scale operations serving consumers from neighbouring countries.
- Stronger, more consistent and more broad-based efforts are needed to tackle the development of the illegal drugs market and the associated threat to society from *organised crime*.
- Drugs policy requires a more comprehensive and permanent form of monitoring. Legislation should be enforced and lessons learnt more systematically. This will require clearer and more alert integrated political leadership as well as an adequately equipped authority that is better able to take an integrated approach to international coordination than is currently the case. The 'drugs authority' proposed by the committee should prevent policy from becoming outmoded in future, and ensure that lessons are learnt where future policy is concerned.
- The plethora of local initiatives aimed at ways of regulating supplies in 'closed' (restricted) coffee shops requires a clear national policy framework and systematic research-based evaluation.
- The committee questions whether the current system (with two schedules of drugs) can be maintained under the Opium Act, and recommends further study and an amendment to legislation introducing a single schedule.

These are the main conclusions of the Advisory Committee on Drugs Policy, which was established by the Minister of Health, Welfare and Sport, the Minister of Justice and the

Minister of the Interior and Kingdom Relations to consider how current drugs policy needs amending to make it sufficiently 'future-proof'. The ministers plan to issue a policy memorandum on drugs, based partly on the recommendations of the committee, in which they will set out the government's plans.

The committee was able to draw on various studies, including an evaluation of drugs policy to date. It also paid a number of working visits, and consulted experts and literature on substance use and drugs policy. Based on this, the committee concluded that the world of drugs has changed to such an extent that current policy is no longer adequate in all respects. Major problems have arisen which are not being fully addressed by existing national and local policy. The committee takes the view that measures are needed to foster and coordinate new policy, and to ensure that we remain alert and responsive to new developments, such as the advent of new generations of drugs. The Netherlands also needs a dedicated 'drugs authority'.

6 Conclusions

The committee considered which aspects of Dutch drugs policy need to change in order to make it sufficiently 'future-proof'. It examined the facts concerning the use of drugs and the way illegal drug markets work. It studied a large number of scientific reports, spoke to experts in the field (scientists, care workers, public servants and the police) and received input from various organisations. On this basis, the committee concluded that drugs policy needs tightening up in various respects. Over the past ten to fifteen years, new knowledge has emerged and changes have occurred in society. These have not been sufficiently reflected in policy to date. The current situation requires a vigorous approach by the government at national level, which ties in with the efforts of local authorities and other social institutions such as schools.

The committee has identified four areas that need tackling as a matter of priority.

[1] Reducing drug and alcohol use among minors

In the Netherlands there appears to be a culture in which the use of alcohol and drugs at a young age is condoned to a certain extent, or at least is not strongly condemned or discouraged. However, there is such strong evidence that frequent use of these substances at a young age is severely damaging to young people's cognitive and social development that action needs to be taken. The committee believes it is important that society focus on discouraging the use of substances by minors. This places a strong moral responsibility upon parents and schools to place the issue squarely at the centre of young people's upbringing and education.

It is important to send out a clear message that it is not 'normal' to use alcohol and drugs under the age of 18. To this end, the committee argues that it should be made illegal to sell alcohol to anyone under the age of 18. Having reached this age, young people must be regarded as capable of making their own personal choices in a well-considered way (and hopefully armed with adequate information concerning the potentially harmful effects).

The committee has also identified a need for tighter policy on young people who risk falling into a pattern of habitual alcohol and drug use. The strategy of 'indicated prevention' involves identifying behavioural problems in young people and launching tailor-made interventions. Since substance use is often combined with other problems, a one-sided approach focusing exclusively on drugs is unlikely to be effective. The strategy will therefore need to be more

comprehensive, involving more broad-based care. This will be difficult to put into effect, however. The care offered will need to be highly accessible, and based on smooth-running, multidimensional collaboration between the education, social welfare and healthcare sectors. It will start with interventions for families with young children who are already starting to display problems (with learning at school, for example), progressing to young people showing early signs of problem behaviour and their families, and to young people (and their families) with fully developed behavioural problems, including addiction. The committee believes that by introducing this form of staged care, interventions will no longer get stranded in bureaucracy and waiting lists. Municipalities should be expected to help ensure such assistance is available by breaking down the barriers between the traditional sectors involved in youth care and services, with the goal of intervening rapidly and effectively when parents or schools sound the alarm.

[2] Coffee shops: return to the small scale, with scope for innovation

In many places coffee shops provide a useful service for cannabis consumers who do not cause any problems of note. However, partly as a result of inadequate and one-sided enforcement, coffee shops in some places have taken on a form that was never intended, focusing on consumers from other countries, and often associated with large-scale organised cannabis production, in which 'grow shops' play a key role (and should therefore also be tackled).

The committee believes there is an urgent need for coffee shops to return to small-scale operations serving only local customers. The current regulation of coffee shops can be continued, where it is sufficiently embedded at a local level, but the existing criteria must be more stringently enforced under criminal law. Where coffee shops are found to be acting as permanent suppliers for consumers from neighbouring countries, the situation must be addressed, with a shift from open coffee shops to a more closed variety. Some form of 'coffee shop club', with permanent members from within the (Dutch) region, may open the possibility of regulated cannabis production and supply to shops. The committee recommends that this possibility be investigated. Other options for the future development of coffee shops – legalisation, prohibition, or regulation by the back door without substantial restrictions on access to the shops themselves – would, on balance, have more drawbacks than benefits, partly because the Netherlands would be neither willing nor able to act in isolation. It is therefore not realistically possible to institute further regulatory changes without international consensus.

[3] Strengthening and broadening the fight against organised drug crime

Organised crime associated with cannabis production has developed rapidly, and such operations (including production for export) are now highly professional. There are strong links with other drugs markets, such as those for ecstasy and cocaine, as well as with other forms of organised crime. This has led to an increase in violence and the accumulation of power through investment in legitimate enterprises. The authorities cannot afford a disorganised response to professional criminal organisations, and in several key areas they have a lot of ground to make up.

The committee would observe that progress is being made in combating organised crime, with the growing use of integrated strategies ('programmatic approach'). This places a special focus on creating permanent barriers to large-scale organised crime. However, the committee has observed that this approach is still in its infancy, and that much remains to be done to ensure it matures into a fully-fledged strategy. The committee also believes that a sectoral approach (to organised cannabis production) may have to be expanded into a broad-based approach that targets the worst criminal organisations. Only a systematic, focused and intelligent strategy will succeed in reducing the threat they pose.

[4] Greater administrative powers and learning capacity

The committee is convinced that a dynamic drugs policy has to be an integrated policy, in which health care, law enforcement and curbs on nuisance complement each other, and no single policy area can claim to be most important. The committee has also established that drugs policy has been only partially updated since the last policy memorandum on drugs was presented in 1995. What is more, it received many reports of inadequate cooperation between policymaking bodies, which have led it to conclude that responsibility is fragmented, divided as it is between several ministries and other bodies.

This conclusion, in addition to the fact that much remains to be done over the next few years at local, national and international level to change a number of important aspects of drugs policy, leads the committee to recommend that a separate national body be established to bring – as well as keep – drugs policy up to standard. The committee makes no recommendation as to what precise form this 'drugs authority' should take, other than to state that it should be positioned close to those with political responsibility, and should have a binding influence on and a facilitating and monitoring role in the development of drugs policy. Although such a body could be set up on a temporary basis to develop policy along

the lines the committee considers necessary, given the need for international coordination, as well as other factors, it would be more logical to instead create a permanent entity which enjoys the benefits of clear political leadership.