

Battle against drugs needs realistic approach - 23 Aug 2008

OPINION: John Herron, *23 August 2008*



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IN 1998, the United Nations held a general assembly special session on drugs and set 2008 as the target date to eliminate, or significantly reduce, the world's drug production and use.

Well, here we are in 2008, and while we've certainly come a long way, drugs still remain a worldwide problem. The elimination of drugs is an ideal many would like to see achieved, but we need to approach drug issues in a realistic and pragmatic manner. Fortunately, the next UN initiative sees the potential to formulate realistic goals and some positive changes for the future, including to the drug control conventions which govern global drug control, and to which many countries (including Australia) are signatories.

Why do we need to make changes to our global drug control efforts? To start with, the three drug control conventions currently have a heavy law enforcement focus. While this is a key aspect of any comprehensive drug control effort, law enforcement is just one of many areas that need to be engaged when tackling drug problems.

Even the executive director of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, Antonio Maria Costa, has himself said that "tighter controls in one region, or on one product, produce a swelling of activity elsewhere. As a result of this balloon effect, the problem is displaced, but not solved."

In addition, it is quite concerning to me and many others that human rights, and their protection, are only referred to once across all three drug control conventions.

Frankly, this is not good enough, especially when considering that those with drug problems are often subjected to severe stigmatisation and discrimination in communities across the world. To put it simply, we have to update the conventions to reflect our most modern and effective approaches of tackling the world's drug problem.

Both Australia and New Zealand have balanced and pragmatic drug policies compared with many other regions in the world.

Why do we do this? Because it works: our national drug strategies are also among the few that are subjected to comprehensive evaluations, and as a result we have long had an evidence-based approach to formulating our drug strategies.

This had led to declining levels of drug use and overdoses, and the maintenance of one of the lowest rates of HIV amongst injecting drug users. We have a global responsibility to share our knowledge and success with other countries and to learn from the approaches of other nations in areas they have done better.

In our region, non-government organisations (NGOs) provide many services within the alcohol and other drug sector. Inevitably, NGOs are confronted with many challenges from being under-resourced and overworked -- which makes attracting and keeping staff a difficult task for many agencies. Despite this, or perhaps because

of these circumstances, many NGOs often offer the most innovative treatment approaches.

It has therefore been very unfortunate that NGOs and their invaluable experience has not been utilised more in important decisions made at the UN level on drug issues.

This time, however, a historic achievement was made recently when the UN actively sought input from NGOs in a review on drug control since 1998. NGOs across the globe reflected on what has been achieved in the past 10 years and provided recommendations on how to improve and strengthen these conventions, but also for enhancing NGO involvement in drug policy at the government and UN level.

In Australia, the Australian National Council on Drugs worked with our colleagues at the New Zealand Drug Foundation to develop a report outlining the response from our region.

Our regional report confirmed what many of us already knew: NGOs have much to offer including frontline experience, independent perspectives and innovative strategies for how to make our drug policy even more effective.

I was very pleased and impressed that so many NGOs across the sector participated in this project in the face of such great time and resource limitations.

Why did they do this? For the greater good. It is something which drives the NGOs in this sector, and they wanted the opportunity to influence global decision making and to promote the successes of our region in the hope of achieving better outcomes for others in the world.

In July, regional representatives, including a delegation from Australia and New Zealand, met at an international forum in Vienna to propose new drug policy resolutions. This meeting concluded that equal weighting should be given to supply and demand reduction across the three drug control conventions. Furthermore, that each country should consider drug misuse primarily as a health issue.

The importance of such resolutions should not be underestimated -- they have the potential to change the face of drug issues on a global scale.

There seem to be so few opportunities to celebrate our success within the drug sector -- numerous challenges will always be apparent. However, what we have seen recently has been no small feat, and I congratulate the UN and most of all the NGOs, which gave their time and resources to participate.

I now wait in anticipation for March next year when a high-level UN meeting of government delegates will meet to discuss the last 10 years of drug issues, including a very important NGO perspective.

I urge them to adopt a realistic and ground-breaking approach to battling the world's drug problem, to ensure that the many victims of some current drug control strategies are helped to overcome problems rather than be further harmed.

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