

**21 APRIL CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE**

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In June this year the European Union has to adopt a new Action Plan on Drugs, covering the period 2005 to 2008. Until today, the elaboration process of this Action Plan has been taking place behind closed doors: to the meetings where officials from the EU Member States and the European Commission discuss the draft texts, no external observers are admitted.

In October last year, the European Monitoring Centre on Drugs and Drug Addiction, the research centre that receives 7,5 millions of EURO per year to evaluate the state of the drugs problem in the EU, published the results of an evaluation of the former Action Plan on Drugs, carried out between 2000 and 2004. These results leave very strong doubts on the question of whether this Plan has been effective in achieving its goals. The prevalence of drug use has not been reduced, availability has not decreased, and concerning drugs related crime and health damage it is impossible to say if things have improved or become worse.

The draft version of the new Action Plan which was released by the Commission in February 2005 broadly has the same goals as the former plan. In the words of the Commission, the plan is said to “target in particular those areas that the evaluation highlighted as needing further progress”. In simple words, this means that an approach is being continued which has been shown to be ineffective by the same institution that is established to inform authorities about the impact of their policies.

Drug policy has a huge impact on European society. Current drug laws lead to the criminalisation of millions of law abiding citizens, without any evidence that this is an effective way of reducing harm caused to public safety. Meanwhile, due the illegal environment, drug consumption often takes place in unsafe and irresponsible ways that create significant harm to the health of both users and their surroundings.

It looks as if authorities responsible for drug policies are trying to ignore the evidence that their policies do not work, while they are supposed to base their policies on evidence of what works and what does not. In democratic societies, we should not continue with policies that we know do not work.

There are some positive things to say about European drug policy, if we look at the local level. In many cities in Europe, legal, medical and political authorities have started to listen to people who are in daily contact with reality on the streets, who are aware of the impact of policies on the lives of common people. As a result they have started to understand that drug policies based on the dogma of prohibition are counterproductive. They have embraced harm reduction as the basic principle of their policies. If you read carefully the annual reports that are published by the EMCDDA, it becomes obvious that measures such as needle exchange, maintenance based therapies, user rooms and the controlled distribution of heroin are the real reason for the few success stories that can be told on current drug policy. On the other hand, in countries where political acceptance of harm reduction is still low, like for instance in the Baltic countries, we face an alarming HIV/AIDS epidemic. To counter it, the European Union should continue to adhere to harm reduction as a crucial element of drug policies.

It is important to stress that harm reduction has not been invented by politicians or authorities. It has been the initiatives of citizens, often working underground, risking to face the law at any time, that have started harm reduction. These citizens, drug consumers or people who care for them, are the true architects of a new European drug policy, and it is time that authorities realise this.

Precisely because of the stigmatisation of drugs and drug users, the change in the way we look at this issue necessarily had to come from below, from inside society, as a way to resolve a well hidden trauma. Firstly at an individual level among consumers themselves, then among their family members and their friends, then at the level of local and national authorities, and finally at the supranational level. Today we have arrived at this level.

Since the first reflections on a European Union policy on drugs started, here in this Parliament in 1986, it has been stressed that citizens should be consulted and involved in the future development of policies. Unfortunately, in the past twenty years, the European Council and the European Commission have never put this engagement into practice. As a result, public and even parliamentary attention has been kept away from the negative outcomes of current policies, so a discussion about the lessons that can be learned from them has not taken place.

Today Europe is still involved in a war on drugs, or better said a war on some drugs, or even better said: a war on some people involved with some drugs. As we in Europe should have learned by now, wars do not tend to have real winners. The question is not if drugs are dangerous. Of course all drugs can be dangerous. The question is if society wins or loses with prohibiting them.

To answer that question, European authorities should start listening to the voices of citizens. To those of drug users in candidate countries like Bulgaria, where possession of less than one gram of any illegal drug, including cannabis, can still lead to a jail term of 15 years. Of health workers who try to restore the full citizenship of drug users as a key objective in their treatment. Of scientists who have produced thousands of pages containing evidence for the use of hemp or coca leaves to ensure global food security and sustainable development. Of relatives who have seen how drug laws have made criminals out of their loved ones.

On behalf of all of them, today we offer you to share a peacepipe with that part of civil society affected by a policy that has proven to be, and continues to be a costly, failing and counter-productive affair. What is needed is a pragmatic public health and public order response, based on the recognition that there never has been nor is likely to be a society without some form of drug use; that most such use will either be recreational or medicinal; and that a health infrastructure will always be needed for that minority of individuals whose use of drugs becomes problematic; that empowering people through health promotion and realistic drug education, rather than alarming them through messages of fear, is a more effective means of restoring social cohesion.

With the approval of the Catania report, the European Parliament has obtained a first step towards this goal. The report is a huge achievement to obtain political consensus about what should be the key direction of intelligent drug policies: harm reduction, creating space for the positive uses of drugs, and last but not least: involvement of civil society in the policy making process. To ignore such a text would deny the European Parliament its main purpose, and this at a time where European citizens are called to vote for a new Constitution. It would give an extremely negative example of what kind of democracy the European Union pretends to be.

Joep Oomen



***EUROPEAN COALITION FOR JUST AND EFFECTIVE DRUG POLICIES – ENCOD vzw***

Lange Lozanastraat 14, 2018 Antwerpen, Belgium  
Telephone: +32 (0) 3 237 7436 / Telefax: +32 (0) 3 237 0225  
e-mail: [encod@glo.be](mailto:encod@glo.be) / [www.encod.org](http://www.encod.org)

**FACT SHEET ON ENCOD**

The European Coalition for Just and Effective Drug Policies, is a pan-European network of currently 120 NGO's and individual experts involved in the drug issue on a daily base: either as consumers, health workers, researchers or policy activists. We are the European section of an International Coalition, which consists of more than 200 NGOs from around the world that have adhered to a Manifesto for Just and Effective Drug Policies (established in 1998)

Our common concern is that citizens are particularly disadvantaged in confronting the effects of the drug trade and the negative side-effects of drug control policies, and at the same time, they are excluded from the (inter)national fora where decisions on these and other related policies influencing drug control, are made.

We believe that drug control policies should be subordinated to guiding principles of sound governance, such as those laid out in the the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Convention on Biodiversity, among other international agreements. In particular to those principles which guarantee respect for social, economic and political rights, and the cultural diversity of all human beings, and those which take into account the sustainability of the planet.

ENCOD facilitates an effective information exchange, shared analysis and co-ordination of actions between a network of organisations that defend the interests of possibly millions of people, many of whom do not dare to express themselves.

ENCOD was set up in 1993 thanks to the support of the European Commission, as an NGO counterpart to the European Monitoring Centre on Drugs and Drug Addiction. However, the Management Board of the EMCDDA later decided to ignore any NGO involvement in the work of the EMCDDA.

The association is legally based in Belgium, and is steered by a Committee of 7 people from different EU countries. Financially, it is completely independent.