

THE ENCOD BULLETIN ON DRUG POLICY IN EUROPE

NR. 11. NOVEMBER 2005

RISK MANAGEMENT

According to figures issued by the European Monitoring Centre on Drugs in Lisbon, some 6,5 billion EUROS are spent annually on enforcing drug prohibition in the EU (this is the proportion of taxes used to pay for activities vital to the maintenance of prohibition such as policing, judiciary, customs and prison personnel). This means that each and every one of the 460 million citizens of the EU is obliged to pay 14 euro each year to finance the war on drugs. An enforced 'drug war tax' whose existence is hardly ever debated in the media or parliament. When resolutions critical of the status quo, such as the report of the European Parliament of December 2004, that asked for an end to the drug war, are approved, the political establishment and the media simply ignore them.

The only justification ever offered for continuing this policy is based on the use of fear as an educational method. This is best seen in the commonly used defence for prohibition that keeping a substance illegal will prevent vulnerable and young people from using it. This argument is very simply undermined as, in the first place, there is no proof that prohibition has kept the demand for illicit drugs down, and secondly, following this logic there is no justification for keeping alcohol and tobacco legal.

The fear of drugs is a very private issue, one that should not be the basis of legislation. At least 35 million adult citizens in the European Union have resolved their fear in one way or another, as they regularly consume at least one illegal drug (cannabis). Probably, a much larger part of the population does not feel threatened by the existence of mind-altering substances either.

What does exist in most people is a perception of risk. As everyone who is familiar with drug consumption knows, all drug use can have risks, but although they should not be underestimated, the promotion of fear is not the most appropriate way of addressing them. In fact, the fear of being busted or discovered is often cited as a crucial factor in unsafe drug use and consequently, health problems.

However, as authorities insist on the need to be afraid of drugs, they make it more difficult for people to handle risks by themselves, with the help of their peers, friends and relatives, or of health workers. What's more, the prohibition of drugs enables authorities to intervene directly in the relationship between, for instance, parents and children.

On 13 and 14 October, the Pompidou Group (a drug policy advisory group to the Council of Europe) discussed the possibility of introducing obligatory urine testing of students in European schools. Delegates of virtually every European government exchanged opinion on the ethical aspects of this proposal, and ENCOD were invited to express the perspective of European civil society organisations.

Urine testing is a dubious way of discouraging young people from taking drugs, and not only because of the many technical problems involved. It can actually make things worse, by spreading fear and distrust among young people and adults. There *are* alternatives to drug testing which are not based on fear: education, discussion, counselling, extracurricular activities, and other methods to build trust between students and adults. Only when they experience the trust and respect of adults will young people learn to manage risks and act responsibly.

Fortunately, most delegates of the Pompidou Group meeting appeared to share this view, and it is quite likely that the Council of Europe will issue a recommendation against obligatory drug testing in schools in the near future. However, in order for European authorities to develop a similar response to drug prohibition as such, more pressure will be needed.

ENCOD continues to motivate Members of the European Parliament to follow up on the historical approval of the report of last year. In fact the MEP after whom the report is named, Giusto Catania from Italy, has agreed to demand that the European Council (highest authority in the European Union) give a clear political sign of its disapproval in the case of the possible extradition of Canadian cannabis activist Marc Emery to the United States, where he may get anything from a 10 year to a life sentence. Catania has asked the European Council to express its concern over this new example of how US acts in contradiction to human rights and freedom of expression.

During a meeting in the European Parliament on 4 October, it was confirmed that ENCOD still intends, with the commitment of 8 Members of 4 different political groups in the European Parliament, to organise a broad dialogue on drugs with civil society in the Spring of 2006. As soon as our financial situation permits it, we will start making concrete plans for this event, that will be an important opportunity to spread the message of responsible risk management in stead of the perpetuation of fear as far as drugs are concerned.

Apart from these efforts, ENCOD organised an information stand and presentations of the ENCOD films in both the Highlife Fair in Barcelona and the London Hemp Fair. On both events, it became clear that a different drug policy already exists. The economic sector that has been created in the current drug policy grey zone in Europe is alive and well. The political sector, however, is barely surviving. To ensure ENCOD's existence in 2006, we are still dependent on those citizens who are willing to invest in a movement to abolish the absurd drug war tax.

Joep Oomen (with the help of Eliot Ross Albert)

www.encoded.org

