

## THE ENCOD BULLETIN ON DRUG POLICY IN EUROPE

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### BUILDING THE CRITICAL MASS

Democracy is in serious danger not when some few people attack her, but when the authorities do not defend her. If the response of the US government on the assaults of 11 september 2001 had been to isolate and capture the ones who were responsible, there would be less people in the world today who dream of repeating these acts. However, with the giant witch hunt that has killed at least 150.000 Afghan and Iraqi citizens, United States and its allies have started a fire that will not die out easily.

A perverse vicious circle has appeared. The climate of insecurity is used by authorities and mass media to increase the repressive approach towards social issues, like migration, or like drugs. Thus, democracy and freedom are being attacked by those who claim to defend them.

At the same time, the force behind any democratic society is transparency. The trust that citizens have in their authorities will depend on the latter's capacities to explain their decisions, based on evidence that is referring to objective realities. In their current drug policies, governments are doing exactly the opposite.

In the Netherlands, as a result of the tolerant policy towards cannabis consumption and distribution, the percentage of 15/16 year old people who regularly consume cannabis is much lower than that of neighbouring countries. The average age of initial heroin use in the Netherlands is among the highest in Europe. A majority of Dutch lord mayors and of the national parliament wants cannabis to be legalized. However, Justice minister Donner does everything in order to turn the clock backwards. Early July, Donner released a study according to which 80 % of the owners of coffeeshops in Amsterdam has a criminal past, the majority of them – what a surprise – for violating the legislation on drugs. As the backdoor of the coffeeshops has not been legalised yet, these are forced to provide themselves on the black market. Criminalising the coffeeshops, Donner hopes to re-start a battle that was lost many years ago. Though he will not succeed in that, the debate on legalisation of cannabis continues to be paralysed.

In the United Kingdom, the conclusions of a study on the impact of current drug policies that was carried out by a Strategical Unit working directly for prime minister Tony Blair were published on 1 July, two years after they had been released. Among others, the Unit determined that the profits of drug traffickers are so big, that police needs to capture between 60 and 80 % of the drugs flow into the country in order to have any impact. Until now, not more than 20 % has been confiscated. Likewise, the study concluded that in spite of the interventions of the past 15 years in each stage of the drugs chain, "cocaine and heroin consumption has increased, prices have fallen and drugs continue to arrive in the hands of users".

During the electoral campaign in early May this year, Blair wrote in an editorial in "The Sun": *"I have spent eight years fighting the war against drugs in our country. I know better than anyone that we have a long, long way to go. I promise, however, to step up our efforts if we get the chance"*

Then finally, in the end of June, the new Action Plan on Drugs of the European Union for the years 2005 to 2008 was approved. As we reported before, the Council of Ministers and the European Commission, when writing this plan, refused to apply the conclusions from the evaluation reports that were published by their own institutions. They also ignored the recommendations of the European Parliament and the voice of local authorities, experts and civil society organisations involved in the drugs issue, who, in the past months, have expressed the urgent need to change the prohibitionist approach and establish the space to explore innovative strategies.

Only because of the complicity of mass media, whose coverage of the drug issue is limited to stories that are meant to entertain people, these events have gone by almost unnoticed. But that does not make them less alarming. The sad conclusion is that in current drug policy-making, evidence and truth are not important, nor are arguments, no matter where they come from.

As a consequence, those who advocate European drug policies that are more human, just and effective, most face the urgent challenge of building the critical mass. It is inevitable that this critical mass will grow, as our societies become more conscious and critical in general. But if we want to have some impact on the public and parliamentary debate, and above all, succeed in our main objective, which is the modification of the UN Conventions at least in 2008, when they need to be evaluated again, it is time to give this critical mass, at least inside Europe, a concrete shape.

To build a critical mass means in the first place to overcome the differences that so often paralyse our own movement. The diversity among researchers, health workers, consumers of different drugs, their relatives, hemp entrepreneurs and social activists from different European countries, cultures and social layers, appears to be a two-edged sword. It makes our message more credible and legitimate, but it can also reduce the efficacy of our actions and the interest of potential new allies and members.

On the other hand it is necessary to make optimal use of our resources. We need to connect all people who have a particular knowledge and availability to work in the different tasks that need to be done: fundraising, maintaining a presence on Internet and in the media, research, make lobby activities etc. Actually tens of activists are involved in this work throughout Europe, and we need to establish a concrete structure to facilitate a co-ordination between them, as well as a common objective.

It is ENCODs objective to maintain a framework for all those who wish to contribute to this process, that should be aiming at a strong presence of the critical masses in Viena in March 2008. There, all forces that resist the creation of imaginary enemies in order to justify wars that are unwinnable, and demand social and peaceful solutions to the problems of this world, should focus upon. It is not victory that matters, it is the effort to obtain it.

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