

LATIN SOUNDS

REPORT ON REFORMA CONFERENCE – BUENOS AIRES

The first Conference of REFORMA , (Platform of drug policy reformers in Latin America) was held in Buenos Aires, Argentina, in a room in the building of the Senate of that country on 7, 8 and 9 September...

The conference showed that Latin America has a lot to contribute to global drug policy reform. In two and a half days, some 30 speakers took the floor, representing a wide diversity of stakeholders in the drug issue: producers, users, judges and legal experts, harm reduction workers and health experts, parliamentarians, drug policy activists from different countries.

In the hometown of tango, the basic tone of almost every speaker was "moderately pessimistic", as Reforma's President, Gustavo de Greiff put it. ... The war on drugs is failing, but the war against the war on drugs is not making much progress either. Somehow the enormous damage that is done by drug prohibition is still overlooked as many people continue to fear the consequences of ending it.

Although there are figures (and most people quote European figures here) that show that this does not have to be the case, most family parents (the basic part of the population in Latin America) continue to believe that making policy more flexible will automatically lead to an increased use of drugs, and therefore is unthinkable.

But depenalisation of use and possession for personal use exists in some countries and is underway in others. Like in Europe, there are but few parliamentarians who really struggle for this issue, and they have to move cautiously and gracefully.

But people also dance samba in Latin America. In several countries, the harm reduction movement is strong and inventive, facing food and hygienic crisis among users living on the street (the experience of Rosario, a town 200 kilometres west of Buenos Aires) and of course blood borne diseases. A Brazilian NGO, Psicotropicus, introduced a safe sniffing kit as many people obtain hepatitis as they snort through money bills.

Meanwhile in Chile, a new sister magazine to the Spanish Cañamo is growing strong, thanks to volunteers and in spite of a lot of resistance from distributing companies.

From the Andes come Salsa and Cumbia. Coca eradication and fumigation fuels the violent confrontation in Colombia, but in the traditional coca countries Peru and Bolivia, it has set in motion a strong movement for coca-leaf depenalisation. It is one of the major claims of an indigenous uprising, which until now has been relatively peaceful, but therefore not less historical.

In Bolivia, general elections will be held in December, which could bring Evo Morales, leader of the country's coca growers, very close to, if not on top of, the presidential seat.

And last but not least the Jamaican reggae sounds make the perfect match. It may be one of his last actions before retiring, but Jamaican Prime Minister Patterson might take the decision, to legalise the Ganja culture and economy. However US Embassy is not waiting patiently for that moment to happen.

Latin America is socially oriented by tradition, so the interaction between liberalizers and socializers, indigenous peasants and big city people, coca merchants and political authorities went rather smoothly. There are differences in opinion and interest, but all minds remain open.

Of course the main problem, it was felt, is universally imposed limits for legislation, giving a blank cheque for the repressive apparatus to do what it likes. Social control can be another form of repression as well, ***so harm reduction, it was said often, should always go together with benefit promotion. The same crisis about the term harm reduction was felt at this conference, as we are having in Europe these days.

In the sideline of the Conference, we were able to have some work meetings too. A group of REFORMA people, together with people from LIA, DRCNet and ENCOD, set together two times to discuss a possible global strategy towards 2008. Nov 2005 in Longbeach and April 2006 in Vancouver.

We identified at least 15 networks or major actors who are operating on the international level trying to influence drug policy debate in the direction of reform. Some of them with many resources, others with almost none, but actors who could play each their role in the movement we all would like to see happening.

We also talked about target groups for this movement; governments, parliamentarians, local authorities, press, experts, celebrities, unions, civil society as such..

And we identified three objectives:

1- the claim for a true evaluation of UN drug strategies, so the next UN summit in 2008 will have something real to deal with.

2- the encouragement of the establishment to act for drug policy reform: experts, dissident officials

3-to mobilise people for mass manifestation in the year coming up towards 2008.

In order to prepare 2008, moments of encounter between the people working in drug policy reform in the several continents should be happening, so strategies can be coordinated and experiences shared and improved.

Finally a proposal came from the Brazilian delegation to organise in the 2nd half of 2006 in Rio de Janeiro a large conference about this issue, uniting drug producers and users, harm reduction people and drug policy reform advocates. Logistical details could not be refined too much as there was no time for that. But it may be possible to organise cheap hosting and accommodation for a few hundred people coming from abroad - and Latin American representatives may be able to travel cheap to Rio.

Of course there are much things that can happen in between that may decide the course of this initiative (who will take part in it, what will be the representation of the different groups etc.) so it is a bit early to foresee what will be the importance of it.

But this could be an issue to follow up on during the next event where some of the groups present will attend, the DPA Conference in Long Beach November, and the next one, which would be the IHRA Conference in Vancouver in May 2006.

Joep Oomen; Sept 15th 2005

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