

Statement at the opening session of World Forum Against Drugs 2018

By Dag Endal
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Distinguished colleagues,

Thanks for the opportunity to address this conference and say something about a network that many of you may not have heard about, namely Drug Policy Futures.

I assume you have all heard, time and time again, that there is a war going on in the drug field. For a long time I have rejected that notion. But I must confess that I have now changed my mind. I now agree. There is a war going on in the drug field. That is a war for drugs.

To my experience, we are today witnessing a global, well-coordinated and most of all, a well-funded propaganda campaign to change peoples' perception of narcotic drugs. It is a war over politicians' minds, over media peoples' minds, over young peoples' minds, and over parents' minds. Moreover, it is becoming increasingly clear that the ultimate goal of this propaganda war is to make narcotic drugs just as accepted worldwide, just as widely used, just as integrated in the culture as alcohol is today in Western societies.

This is one of the reasons why Drug Policy Futures has found it appropriate to use the slogan: Prevent. Don't Promote.

Many of you will know that intense drug policy discussions are going on in the United Nations system these days. The discussion has its roots back in 2009 when the member states adopted a Political Declaration and a Plan of Action to counter the world drug problem. The results were scheduled to be reviewed in 2019. Then came the UNGASS 2016 meeting in New York, a mid-term review that was not originally planned. UNGASS, the United Nations General Assembly Special Session on Drugs, adopted an Outcome Document that all countries approved of, more or less willingly.

We are now in the so-called Post-UNGASS period. Or rather the pre-2019 period. Member states are in the process preparing for a global drug policy summit in March 2019. That will be an extended version of the annual meeting of the UN Commission on Narcotic Drugs. The 2019 meeting is called a Ministerial Segment, in an attempt to boost the importance of the meeting. The hope is that ministers from many Member States will come to underline the importance of the international collaboration to combat drug problems.

UN discussions on drugs have over the years become increasingly complicated. On the one hand, we have witnessed good, constructive debates in the plenary of the Commission on Narcotic Drugs in Vienna the last year, where focus has been on implementation: How can the many good words from the UNGASS Outcome Document become effective actions at national and local level? Many good practices have been shared in a constructive atmosphere.

On the other hand; there is an underlying polarization of the international drug debate. It is becoming more difficult to reach consensus among the Member States. There is a group of countries pushing a liberalization agenda, wanting to have more liberal positions from the United Nations and ultimately also a change in the UN Conventions on drugs. As a minimum

they want an interpretation of the conventions where it is up to the individual Member States to define their own policies, including to legalize drugs.

On the other hand there is a group of countries that have the opinion that the UNGASS Outcome Document went too far in stressing health concerns and human rights issues, among other things. These countries prefer to go back to the 2009 political Declaration as the basis for United Nations drug policies.

Then there is a large group of countries in the middle that accept the UNGASS Outcome Document as the best common platform for the Member States to build on. This is also the opinion of the organization in the Drug Policy Futures network. We consider The UNGASS Outcome Document as a good and comprehensive menu for a broad, balanced and effective drug policy, based on public health, human rights and the three international drug conventions.

It is this landscape that Drug Policy Futures operates as a global, informal network for civil society organisations that focus on prevention, treatment and recovery. An important feature of Drug Policy Futures is that we reject the simple dichotomy between "a war on drugs" on the one hand and "legalization" on the other.

Instead we advocate for a health-based and comprehensive drug policy where the whole continuum of interventions are used in a balanced manner; and here we can simply quote from the UNGASS Outcome Document: "prevention, early intervention, treatment, care, recovery, rehabilitation and social reintegration, as well as measures aimed at minimizing the adverse health and social consequences of drug abuse", end quote.

Two of the hosts of today's conference, the World Federation Against Drugs and European Cities Against Drugs were among those who took the initiative to establish Drug Policy Futures five years ago. They have been members since the start.

Drug Policy Futures is in many ways a network of networks, as several big international NGOs with members in countries all over the world are part of Drug Policy Futures, like IOGT International, CADCA and Eurad. American members like Smart Approaches to Marijuana – SAM in short – play an important role in Drug Policy Futures with their first-hand knowledge about the legalization debate in the US.

The Drug Policy Futures network grew gradually stronger during the preparations to the UNGASS meeting in New York in April 2016. Still it is a very loose structure. In its simplest form Drug Policy Futures is a mailing list that we use to share information among the members and, when needed, to share tasks and responsibilities. The aim is to spend a minimum of time on organizational matters and rather work on drug policy development. One of our documents can be found on your tables; the Ten Steps for National Action on Drugs. It is written as ten recommendations to Member States for their implementation of the UNGASS Outcome Document.

Our statement to the UNGASS meeting in 2016 had a very simple headline with only two words: Action. Now. We have appealed to UN Member States to use the years leading up to the next milestone in 2019 for one thing: National and local action and policy implementation.

Our position is that we don't need more words, documents or commissions. Using still more years for a continued struggle over words will not make any difference for those who suffer from drug use, directly or indirectly. Using available evidence-based interventions will make a difference.

We have also challenged the notion that everything has been tried and that nothing works. This is being used by some legalization activists as an argument to have a completely different approach to drug policy. That is fake logic. There are many interventions that do work. The problem is rather that most of them are not used by governments.

At this point I would like to remind ourselves that we must be careful not to end up only as defenders of status quo in drug policy, even if there are many good things to defend in many countries. We have to serve also as drivers of change, simply because change is needed in drug policies in all countries. Not the least in countries where police, military and repression is the foundation for drug policies.

In the introduction to the Ten Steps document, the members of Drug Policy Futures have concluded that the UNGASS Outcome Document provides a comprehensive menu for a broad, balanced and effective drug policy, based on public health, human rights and the three international drug conventions. We have suggested that governments now give priority to the following ten areas:

1. Reduce drug use prevalence
2. Mobilize a million communities
3. Programmes for better parenting
4. Prioritize early intervention and assistance to vulnerable groups
5. Offer treatment, rehabilitation, and harm-reduction alternatives
6. Organize local support systems after specialized treatment
7. Support self-help groups for drug users and those in recovery
8. Support alternative development
9. Develop and implement alternatives to incarceration
10. Implement the principle of proportionality in sanctions

This menu, these ten points bring us back to the start, namely the slogan of Drug Policy Futures: Prevent. Don't Promote.

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