



Reflexion on the 2nd meeting of the Civil Society Forum on European Drug Policy May 20-21 2008 in Brussels

"Some of my most important and intimate events in life were initiated, accompanied or celebrated with the use of substances. Some of these substances were legal, others were illegal, but all of them marked these precious milestones in my life." Participant Civil Society Forum

"The best way to control drugs is with a policeman with a snifferdog." Another participant to the Forum

"There have been examples of drug free societies in Europe. But these societies were no democracies. New democracies often show inevitable increases in drug use. In Europe of today we will look for effective drug policies that also reflect and respect the basic values and principles of countries in Europe." Representative of the European Commission

Whereas drugs use is as old as mankind, international laws and policies to control and regulate the use of drugs are only a century old. International community, national countries and local communities have ever since been struggling with ways to cope with the use of drugs, leading to significant different regional approaches and practices. With the emerging importance of the European dimension of politics, the various countries have moving toward a shared view on drug politics. Currently there is European consensus on an evidence-based integrated strategy with complementary approaches to reduce supply, demand and drug related harm, but the final implementation is up to the individual member states and leaves room for different national priorities. The European Commission has established a forum from civil society to increase dialogue with various stakeholders in the field and in order to improve and tailor drug policies. The Civil Society Forum is designed to serve as a platform for dialogue, consultation and exchange of information and views.

A wide variety of organisations are currently represented in the Forum; from user, parent and health professional organisations to networks from therapeutic communities, harm reduction services,

rehab facilities. Voices urging for a drug free Europe, voices urging for more liberal drug policies and anything in between. The Forum has been established in 2007 and held its 2nd meeting in May 2008.

Various presentations were held by representatives of the EC on specific elements of the overall drug strategy 2005-2012, the action-plan 2005-2008 and the coming period of 2009-2012.

Some preliminary outcomes of the EC's evaluation of their action plan:

- No significant reduction in drug using prevalence is noticed. Most countries report a stable or slight decrease in drug use, with exception of cocaine that is increasing popular in a lot of European countries.
- High prevalence of drug related infectious diseases in most countries, but a general decreasing incidence (with major exception for the Baltic region).
- Significant reduction of drug-related deaths, which is currently leveling off asking for new or additional responses.
- Prices of drugs have dropped and quality has been more or less stable, while major increases in supply seizures are reported.
- Drug treatment programmes are common all over the EU, but standards of good practice and evaluation on effectiveness are hardly used. Rehab and reintegration programmes are reported to be inadequate in quality, access and quality.

During the meeting, member of the Forum welcomed the opportunity to reflect on the policy objectives and results but expressed their concern regarding the lack of evaluation and related analysis of the general drug policy, leaving countries and organisations plenty of space for individual interpretations, unscientific believes and not effective approaches. The Commission accepted this criticism but said it was unable to stop their ongoing political process but hope that civil society provide feedback in order to 'change directions -where needed-, while driving'. Harm reduction organisations urged for solid evaluation on all aspects of policies (also on treatment and supply reduction). Another important raised issue is on compliance to human rights and freedoms and whether the EC is able or willing to address human right violations of drug users in third countries where EC is funding provided (for instance build law enforcement or alternative crop development).

- Important information for anyone who is interested in funding possibilities in the programme 'Drug prevention and Information': the call for proposal is expected in September 2008, with a period of 2 months for application.
- The minutes of the meeting will be shared through the Correlation website in due time. The next Forum meeting will probably be scheduled in the beginning of 2009.

The Civil Society Forum has an even unexplored potential if it is able to develop in a discussion and platform between the various actors who often work with the same dedication, with large commitment, but on completely different assumptions and in totally different directions. It can be the place where people in the drug field can learn about the evidence, strengths and limitations of all approaches. Including ones own approach.

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