

THE ENCOD BULLETIN ON DRUG POLICY IN EUROPE

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ZERO POINT ONE TOLERANCE

Since “zero tolerance” drug policy has increasingly come to dominate the thinking of most governments, one would be tempted to conclude that tolerance was a very bad thing indeed. Of course, the concept of “zero tolerance” is very useful for making political propaganda: it makes perfect soundbites that ordinary citizens can understand. But apart from moral crusaders and puritan fundamentalists, most people practice tolerance every day. It is the basis of our co-existence with other people – so why should we categorically reject it when it comes to drug policy?

In the United States, the country where “zero tolerance” was invented, the results of this policy are an unmitigated disaster, not to mention productive of Alice-in-Wonderland absurdities such as was recently experienced by Farid Ghehiouche, chair of ENCOD, when he tried to visit the Conference of the Drug Policy Alliance, held from 10 to 12 November in Long Beach, California. Farid was found in possession of 0,0001 gram of cannabis when he arrived at the San Francisco airport. He was then taken to a prison cell where he spent the night together with 13 other people, after which he was sent back to France with a stamp in his passport warning that he may never enter the USA again without first asking for a visa. Like Farid, 1.6 million people are arrested for drugs each year in the US. Two thirds of the prisoners in America – over 1.2 million people – are locked up for non-violent offences, most of them drug-related. Since 1980, the number of drug prisoners has increased seven fold.

In the Netherlands, where tolerance between different religions and cultures had been the secret behind the country’s prosperity in the 17th and 18th centuries, the net result of a tolerant policy towards cannabis has been remarkable. According to the latest annual report of the European Monitoring Centre on Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA), the last month prevalence of cannabis use among 15/16 year olds in the Netherlands is lower than that of 8 other EU member states (Italy, Slovenia, Belgium, Spain, France, the UK, Ireland and Czech republic) although the availability of cannabis for adults is openly toleratedⁱ.

But Justice Minister Donner continues to refuse a regulation of the cannabis market (requested by many Dutch lord mayors and by a majority of the Dutch parliament) , threatening with the outrage of the rest of Europe that Holland would have to deal with if it took such a step. According to Donner, regulation of the cannabis market would not reduce public nuisance related to drugs. Because to reduce “public nuisance”, “zero tolerance” is needed. In short, with the concept of “public nuisance” , authorities justify repressive measures against those whom they consider to be producing drug related nuisance: mostly the users. And the result is that the amount of nuisance for everyone involved is multiplied.

Nuisance can be reduced when measures are taken to promote safety. In a system characterised not by zero, but even by zero point one tolerance, a legally regulated and closed circuit between producers and consumers of drugs would reduce the role of organised crime. Installing a legal market on a fair trade basis for cannabis, coca and opium and their derivatives could create perspectives for development in poor rural areas of South America, Africa and Asia, where conditions today are practically forcing many to migrate. It might also lead to the availability of natural products that could compete with synthetic ones, especially where negative side effects are concerned.

In the Netherlands, after the assassination of film maker Theo van Gogh, the coffeeshop was one of the only places where ordinary citizens of both muslim and non-muslim background would associate with one another — sometimes in a lively manner, but always with respect. When these discussions took place, walls between the two communities could be broken down. It is quite likely that the effects of cannabis, unlike that of alcohol for instance, would have contributed to this result.

At the moment, the policy-making process with regards to drugs does not include these thoughts or arguments. The people who could present them, users, producers or distributors of drugs as well as concerned citizens are not represented in the debate. Instead they are in prison, abandoned to their fate, stigmatised or just plain ignored. A few of them are recognised by the political and legal apparatus, but their voice is too weak to make a difference.

Policy-makers need to listen to citizens. The nationwide riots in France in november (caused by the death of two youngsters who tried to escape a police control) clearly showed the limits of a zero tolerance policy. French authorities will not be able to prevent a repetition of these events by installing curfews in the affected areas, where petty drug trade has become, among others, a method of social integration. They may obtain better results by involving the population directly in the solution to their problems.

ENCOD continues to plan the organisation of a conference in the European Parliament, early in 2006, with the collaboration of 8 members of the EP. The goal will be to express political support for innovative policies that are currently taking place on a local level in Europe — policies with the potential to reduce harm caused to public health and safety in relation with drugs — and to explore the role of Europe in obtaining an open debate on the UN Conventions on Drugs, at least in 2008, when they will have to be evaluated.

Nevertheless, ENCOD continues to be dependent on the support of all those EU citizens who wish to contribute to a better future in drug policy. In the past month, various signs have been received from ENCOD Members that ensure the financial independence of the network at least for the moment. However, support in the form of new members is still needed.

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ⁱ See <http://stats05.emcdda.eu.int/en/elements/eyefig01a-en.html>