

Report of the IHRA Conference

21 to 24 March 2005

Belfast, Northern Ireland

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The conference was attended by approx. 800 harm reduction and drug policy experts from mainly Anglosaxon countries (North America, UK, Australia), with this year a large presence of Eastern Europe, Iran and China. It is the yearly meeting of the International Harm Reduction Association, aiming to promote the application of HR in legal and illegal drug policies.

The IHRA Conference is a huge event, with 6/7 sessions taking place at the same time, with 6/7 speakers participating in each session. This leads to the audience being presented with a large number of presentations of sometimes not more than 7 minutes each, describing mostly the result of a study or a particular practice inside the global harm reduction field.

Of course the Conference gives an interesting panorama of the achievements of harm reduction within the current legal possibilities. But it also makes clear that in many cases, harms can just be controlled and not reduced, while in other cases, they cannot even be controlled. At the Belfast conference there seemed to be many people who want more than Harm Reduction. They are working inside harm reduction services, and have become "contaminated" by arguments for reform.

People used the conference to give and take useful information about programmes or studies in other parts of the world, make contacts and meet old and new friends. Most people at this conference seem to share the feeling that something is changing for the good, but we should be working more actively towards that change.

Some sessions included concrete experiences of the drug policy reform movement, like for instances the cases of Russia and Bulgaria. In Bulgaria things have gone worse in the past years, with up to 15 years imprisonment for possession of any quantity, and this was all after the government received 2 million GBP from the UK to reorganise its drug policy. However, also in Sofia there is HOPE.

The Conference dedicated one session, with Danny Kushlick and Neil Hunt from the UK, Fredrick Polak from the Netherlands, Nick Stafford and Alex Wodak from Australia and Ethan Nadelmann from the US, to drug policy models in a post-prohibitionist scenario. In the session it became clear that models would need to be diverse between various countries, as well as they would need to integrate the situation of producers and distributors, some of them living in the Southern part of the world. So at the same time, the participants realised that drug policy should be decided locally but thought through globally.

To do this, there needs to be a more equal representation particularly of those involved in Asia, Africa (almost non-existent on this Conference), Latinamerica, non-white Northern America). How to do this in practice is of course another issue. This could be the challenge for the next Conference to take place next year in Vancouver, where there is good hope to believe that the angle of at least producers of drug related plants will be better represented.

In the sideline of the conference, many meetings took place. ENCOD members participated in one about the result of the NGO actions at the Vienna CND meeting, which seems to become a new lobby towards the UNAIDS meeting. Another meeting created a new initiative around International Drug User activism (where Andria, Dasha, Milena and Stijn participated) and finally, the ENCOD Steering Committee took place