

EUSKO JAURLARITZA



GOBIERNO VASCO

ETXEBIZITZA ETA GIZARTE
GAIETAKO SAILA
Gizarte Gaietako Sailburuordetza
Droga Gaietako Zuzendaritza

DEPARTAMENTO DE VIVIENDA Y
ASUNTOS SOCIALES
Viceconsejería de Asuntos Sociales
Dirección de Drogodependencias

USE OF DRUGS AND ADVOCACY

**A RESEARCH INTO THE PARTICIPATION OF DRUG USER
ORGANISATIONS IN THE DESIGN OF DRUG POLICIES ON A
LOCAL AND EUROPEAN LEVEL**

FINAL REPORT

Antwerp, May 2009



WWW.ENCOD.ORG



EUROPEAN COALITION FOR JUST AND EFFECTIVE DRUG POLICIES – ENCOD vzw

Lange Lozanastraat 14, 2018 Antwerpen, Belgium
Telephone: +32 (0) 3 293 0886 / Mob: +32 (0) 495 122644
e-mail: info@encod.org / www.encod.org

Dear reader,

Please find herewith the final report of a research on the participation of associations representing drug users in the design and implementation of policies that directly affect their lives: drug policies.

Concretely the research has looked into the way this participation takes place on a local level (in the Drug Plans of the Autonomous Community of Euskadi – Basque Country, Spain) and on a European level (the European Union Drug Action Plans).

The research was carried out between October 2008 and April 2009, by the European Coalition for Just and Effective Drug Policies (ENCOD), in collaboration with various of its members in the Basque Country (Ganjazz, Ekimen 2000 and Iker Giraldo Cuadrado), and in the rest of Spain: FAC and FAUDAS. We wish to express our gratitude to all drug users, representatives of drug user organizations, health workers and experts who gave their time and energy to this research. Especially to those who made this project possible:

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We also wish to express our gratitude to the Basque Government, Direction Drug Dependencies, for giving us this opportunity. We hope this report will be useful to improve the dialogue between authorities and drug users, and that this dialogue will lead to more effective and just drug policies..

We hope you will enjoy reading this report.

Please contact us with any questions or suggestions.

On behalf of Encod,
Virginia Montañes Sánchez, President

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ON THE RESEARCH

The participation of social movements in the drug debate has been the core business of Encod since it was founded in 1993. The Coalition has participated in all efforts that were initiated by the various institutions of the European Union to establish a dialogue process with civil society on drugs.

In recent years, local, national and European administrations have also started to understand the importance of giving a voice to the population who is living the daily reality of the drug phenomenon.

However, much work has to be done still to make this dialogue useful for both parts. To identify what is specifically needed for this dialogue, the ENCOD General Assembly decided in June 2009⁸ to carry out a research on the participation of organisations affected by drugs in the political debate.

Objectives

This research had four objectives:

1. To analyse the real possibilities for drug user organisations to participate in the drug debate in general and in the design and implementation of drug action plans in particular.
2. To analyse the capacities of drug user organisations at the moment of intervening in the political debate and identifying their difficulties in this intervention.
3. To elaborate a series of recommendations towards improving the possibilities for participation on behalf of associations and collectives of drug users in the drugs debate, both at the level of the Basque Country as well as in the European Union.
4. To contribute to a coordinated participation of ENCOD members in different drug forums (at the local level in the Basque Country as well as on EU level)

Methodology

To obtain the objectives of the research, two research tools were applied: a questionnaire and a workshop with the SWOT methodology. Besides, in April 2009, a workshop was held to analyse the results of the research.

Questionnaire

On 20 October 2008, a questionnaire was sent to tens of organisations of drug users in Europe, as well as published on the ENCOD website. During the International Drug User Day conference in Copenhagen, Denmark, between 31 October and 2 November, we interviewed several participants, following the methodology of a semi-structured interview, with the help of the questionnaire¹. Finally the following 35 organisations responded to the questionnaire:

¹ ANNEX 1 : questionnaire attached.

International networks: ENCOD, INPUD

Denmark: BrugerForeningen

France: Techno +

Germany: Akzept

Ireland: UISCE

Netherlands: Adviesburo Drugs

New Zealand: Green Cross

Norway : Foreningen for Human Narkotikapolitik

United Kingdom: Black Poppy, John Mordaunt Trust, Legalise Cannabis Alliance, Legalise Cannabis Campaign Scotland

Spain: Almadia, AMEC, Asaupam, Asociación Volver a la Vida, Asociación DESAL, Asociación JOMAD, Ayuda al Toxicómano Nueva Ilusión, ARSECSE, Asociación Minera de Ayuda a Toxicómanos, Alborada, Asociación Alternativa Joven, ALPRED, AFADU, ALAT, Club de Tastadores de Cannabis del Collsacabra, Ekimen2000, Energy Control, Federación ENLACE, MACA, SOS Nunca es Tarde

Basque Country: Paotxa, Asociación Ai Laket.

SWOT methodology

Secondly the SWOT methodology was used during the workshop that took place from 21 to 23 November 2008 in Murgia (Spain). In this workshop 21 organisations of drug users took part: 8 from the Basque Country, 7 from the rest of Spain and 6 from the rest of the European Union.

The methodology of the workshop consisted of a S.W.O.T (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) analysis. The SWOT analysis allows a collective of people to make an analysis of its vulnerability, taking into account its internal strengths and weaknesses, as well as its external opportunities and threats.

The weaknesses are the weak or improvable points inside a collective that reduce its capacity to develop and therefore should be controlled and improved. The strengths are the strong points, the capacities and resources in an organisation. The threats are the elements that can possibly obstruct the successful implementation of a certain strategy carried out by a group or organisation. Finally, the opportunities are the elements that can turn into an advantage for this strategy.

In the workshop, participants reflected on the following questions related to the purpose of the research:

- How can people who use drugs and their organizations contribute to the policies and plans related to the social phenomenon of drugs? In the field of prevention, social, legal and health protection, the reduction of risks and harms, the gender perspective and the consumption by people in vulnerable situations, etc.

- Essential difficulties that are experienced by people who use drugs and their organizations when participating in discussions on drug related policies and plans. Proposals to solve these difficulties.
- Needs of people who use drugs and their organizations when participating in discussions on drug related policies and plans.
- Key aspects to be presented by people who use drugs and their organisations when participating in discussions on drug related policies and plans.

The following organisations took part in the workshop:

Basque Country: Pannagh, Ganjazz, Ai Laket, Comisión Ciudadana Antisida de Alava, Paotxa, Amalurra y LRKG, Ekimen2000.

Spain: FAUDAS, FAC, Energy Control, Alacannabis, MACA, AMEC, Federación Enlace.

Europe: Akzept (Germany), LCA (United Kingdom), PIC (Italy), MDHG - Amsterdam Drug Users Union (The Netherlands), ENCOD and INPUD (International).

Askagintza, Asociación T4, Comisión Ciudadana Antisida de Bizkaia, Itxarobide and The Hungarian Civil Liberties Union (Hungary) were also invited to the workshop but they could not participate

Analysis of the results

On April 24 and 25, 2009, 26 representatives of 16 associations and nationwide federations (all from Spain), 2 representatives of the Direction on Drug Dependencies of the Basque Government and 5 staff members of this direction met in Mugía, Vitoria, to analyse the results of the report Drugs and Diplomacy.

The workshop, that was entitled *Learned Lessons*, counted with the participation of the Spanish organisations that are mentioned above as well as two more: ARSECSE and the Comisión Ciudadana Antisida de Bizkaia.

During the workshop the results of the research were analysed and elaborated in detail in three concrete issues: the experience of user organisations in political advocacy, contributions to harm reduction and inclusion of the gender aspect.

ANALYSIS

Based on the analysis of the answers that were received in the questionnaire and the reflections of the people who participated in the SWOT, this report includes the conclusions and recommendations to improve the participation of the people who use drugs and their associations in the design and elaboration of policies on the social phenomenon of drugs

The report is accompanied by a short video documentary that gives an impression of the workshop in Murgia.

The establishment of an organisation representing the interests of users of illegal drugs is a crucial part of a process in which marginalized and excluded people try to recover their voice and dignity as normal citizens with the full rights of a citizen. Drug user organisations essentially try to convert the heavily stigmatised position of drug users into one of legitimate actors that may form opinions on, contribute to, and collaborate with policies that directly affect them and that are supposed to be aimed at improving the health and wellbeing of drug users.

In their efforts to obtain the status of a respected partner that deserves to be invited to dialogues and consultations with local, national and European authorities when drug policies are designed and implemented, drug user organisations meet various challenges and dilemmas. Some of these challenges and dilemmas have to do with the way the outside world looks upon drug users, some of them have to do with the way that users look upon themselves and again others with the way users look upon the outside world, especially authorities.

Challenges and dilemmas are inter-related. A weakness can turn into a strength if it is correctly dealt with. An opportunity can turn into a threat if it is dealt with in the wrong way. Therefore we have chosen to describe these challenges and dilemmas together, following a list of crucial observations that were made by the participants in the research. The order of these observations is arbitrary, one is not more important than the other.

When we mention drug user organisations, we refer to organisations of users of prohibited drugs or organisations in which these people play an important role. In practice these organisations can be divided in three categories: cannabis users, party drug users and users of street drugs such as opiates and cocaine. These organisations have sometimes very different characteristics, and to put them together in the same bag is not always an obvious, or helpful, thing to do.

However, when their relationship with authorities and experiences in political dialogues are concerned, these differences are less important: they share very similar experiences. Therefore we have chosen not to make any formal distinctions between drug user organisations in this report. Where particular issues are mentioned that are of specific relevance to one or more of these three types of organisations, this is explained.

Participating in the policy dialogue

Of the 35 organisations responding to the questionnaire, 31 reported having had experiences with dialogues and consultations with authorities. Most of these experiences (27) were characterised as formal meetings in a physical set up, held on an incidental basis. Only 12 organisations reported having had experiences with a structural dialogue consisting of a regular series of meetings.

Most respondents (25) reported that the dialogue was related to a particular issue (the writing of a new policy document, for instance), while little more than half of the respondents also mentioned the general drugs debate as a topic of discussion in these dialogues. The initiative for the dialogues came mostly from the user organisations themselves (25) while 13 respondents also mentioned that they had been invited to a dialogue by the authorities.

When asked if they considered the dialogue to have been a positive experience, 16 organisations responded yes, 13 no and 2 said it had been neither good nor bad. However, when asked if they thought their recommendations had been taken into account by authorities, only 7 answered yes, 10 a little bit and 15 respondents say this has not been the case.

Whether the dialogues have resulted in any difference in attitudes of those who took part in them remains unsure. Both with regards to the question of whether or not they had noted any difference in attitude among authorities before and after the dialogues and if they had noted such difference among themselves, exactly 50% of the organisations responded that they had noted such a difference, while the other half said they hadn't.

One reason for the disappointing result of dialogue between authorities and drug user organisations could be the inequality between the two where political experience is concerned. With regards to the question of whether they have ever received training courses in advocacy or political lobby activities, only 7 organisations responded affirmatively. Of these 7 organisations, 4 received this training by coincidence while they were members of other social movements.

In general drug user organizations describe the dialogues as “token gestures”, symbolic encounters that serve to calm down tensions, but not to learn from each other or explore alternative approaches. Various organisations conclude that each time they are called in for a meeting, they return happily, only to find afterwards that their recommendations have been largely ignored in the design and implementation of Action Plans.

Challenges and dilemmas

We have to learn everything by doing

When we analyse the capacities of drug user organisations to intervene in dialogues on drug policy, without doubt, the weakness most frequently mentioned by drug user

organisations to participate in political debates is the lack of availability of qualified people to carry out this work.

Among the 35 organisations that responded to the questionnaire, only 7 had received training courses in political strategies, and only 3 of these were related to drug policy. The need to receive training was confirmed both by the organisations who participated in the SWOT methodology as in the analysis workshop. This lack of training not only means that representatives of user organisations have to learn all this 'on the job', it also leads to a lack of continuity in the knowledge and competences that are gained by these representatives. As a result, these resources remain concentrated in too few people, and cannot be shared with others or applied elsewhere. Mechanisms need to be created to transfer these acquired skills.

On the other hand, representatives of organisations mention the difficulties of mobilising the user population, who, for various reasons are not motivated to associate themselves, not to mention to express themselves politically. People fear the consequences of "coming out of the closet", as this can have a huge impact on their social status and even have legal consequences.

Apart from the insecurity related with the fact of consuming illegal drugs, belonging to an organization that defends the rights of drug users or advocates for the legalization of prohibited substances can provoke dangerous situations or reactions from the legal or political apparatus, or from the social surroundings.

Due to the social stigma on drug consumption many organisations are obliged to act in a modest way, avoiding a high profile in the media. This objective is contrary to what an organisation should do in order to mobilise people or obtain the attention of media or politicians with whom to debate.

Finding common ground (among different groups)

People who set themselves up as the head of an interest organisation must prepare themselves for a huge psychological pressure. When this interest organisation is formed by drug users, this is even more the case. Many representatives express the feeling that their claims, which they feel are legitimised by the existence of a profound injustice committed against hundreds of millions of people throughout the world, are received with disrespect and arrogance by the political circles.

In the media, false and manipulated information about drugs and drug users appear on a regular basis, sometimes originating from official institutions, political representatives and the media. Thus, the public opinion concerning drugs is based on images in the press that are dominated above all by the association with problems, criminality and social nuisance.

This situation implies that while the representatives of user organisations who are involved in political lobby feel they have to show wisdom, patience and empathy in their relation with authorities, the treatment they themselves receive consists, in the best case, of symbolic sympathy as a gesture of politeness, or, in the worst case, of total indifference.

At the same time, these representatives do not always count on the support of the people who they represent, the users themselves. Most drug users consider politics as something that is taking place far away from their daily reality. Consequently, many user representatives characterise their work as frustrating, tiring and exhausting. As many of them do this work voluntarily, it can be no surprise that several of them abandon it after some time or suffer from burn out.

Lack of common aims and resources

The story of drug user organizations could be summarised in the slogan “from protest to proposal”. From actors who simply are affected by drug policies, they have become actors who intend to influence these policies, criticize authorities, make contributions, elaborate creative and enriching initiatives as well as concrete proposals to replace prohibition. As one participant said during the analysis workshop: before we were hippies, now we are health workers”.

In spite of that, organisations of drug users have difficulties in finding a minimum of common aims. Although they operate in similar areas, organizations do not always know or appreciate each other. This is due to the stigmatisation that exists between users of different substances (cannabis users tend to look down upon heroin users who tend to look down upon cocaine users etc.) or to the differences in social status between persons who use drugs (professional, party drug user vs. street user).

Differences can also be related to strategies. While some users insist that the most important issue of their political activism should consist of the defence of the right to consume without being considered as a criminal (“the State should not interfere in what I decide to put in my body”), claiming the right to manage pleasures and euphoric states of mind, others choose to apply a more cautious strategy and try to promote measures such as the reduction of harms and risks, while accepting the current situation, in which drugs are prohibited. Some organisations even accept terms like “patients” in order to “decriminalise” their situation. As a result it may become difficult to develop a global vision among the organisations that encompass all these concerns.

On the other hand, heterogeneity among users, who often share different social status and origins, is considered to be a strength, as in their organizations people unite among one issue that is the same for all. Also in this work, the day to day experience with fighting against stigmatisation is important. Differences between women and men, hetero- and homosexuals, persons with different ethnic or social origin tend to play a less important role than is the case in other social movements, because the stigma that they have in common, i.e. their condition as drug user, and the goal to eliminate it are put as the first priority in the agenda of these organisations.

Finally there are problems caused by a structural lack of economic resources: most organizations lack infrastructure to hold meetings, physical conditions to carry out office work, edit letters or comments or gather scientific data. Besides these organizations often find themselves in a situation of legal insecurity: either because of their status as users, or because their activities can be seen as anti-establishment

(as they are oriented towards legal reform) the organizations run the risk of entering into conflict with legal authorities, which reduces their capacities to mobilise and increase their influence.

Curiously, the lack of resources is also a strength, as it forces organisations to be economical, patient and creative, and increases their capacity to improvise. It also strengthens the internal character of the organizations: people do not commit themselves in order to make money but because they are convinced that it is necessary to change laws and policies and thus improve the situation for many people around them and for society as a whole.

Street credibility

Drug user organisations have one large advantage over any other actor in the drugs debate (be it authorities, doctors or researchers): their field experiences. These experiences are extremely valid, in various ways. Users have experience in dealing with pleasure and risks in the use of a psycho-active substance that is very useful in planning prevention campaigns. Likewise user organizations can serve as a channel of information between authorities and citizens. They represent a hidden population. This fact gives them credibility, as they bring hidden problems to the surface and can contribute novel solutions.

User organisations can report directly and instantly to authorities on new phenomena that occur on the drugs market or on negative consequences of drug policies, for instance in the case of serious public health hazards. Likewise they promote methods of risk and harm reduction through networks of drug users and make users aware of the need to take these methods into account.

Drug user organisations can also elaborate proposals to solve practical problems that users and their surroundings experience as a result of drug use or the way society deals with this use. Drug users know how other drug users behave. This gives them an expertise that is very useful for the elaboration of harm and risk reduction interventions, and for the training of personnel to carry out these interventions.

The credibility that drug user organisations have as representations of the people who are directly affected by the drug issue, can be a two-edged sword. It takes years to build credibility, but it can be destroyed in one minute. Credibility is something that needs to be continuously maintained, it has to be well founded all the time. The expertise has to be maintained with a continuous flow of new people who have to feel welcome to share their experiences with the rest of the organisation. Only in this way can expertise be continued, archived, transmitted and applied elsewhere by other groups.

Drug users tend to claim a space that is exclusively theirs and operate from there towards the outside world. However, when once they have this private space, they tend to forget the global nature of the drug issue and focus on minor issues that are important for their lives. The drug issue as such does not only affect drug users, but also their families, their neighbours etc. By having an open relationship to these groups (and also doctors, politicians etc.) the global nature of the issue continues to

be present in the organisation and this facilitates a better understanding of the official reasons behind drug policies.

Representatives of drug users are the mouth of the organisation; they should listen to all comments made by their members and elaborate proposals. They need to develop a capacity to distinguish valid contributions from invalid ones, but should take care not to become dominant.

Representatives of drug user organisations should take care not to develop a “social worker” mentality, and be careful not to distance themselves from their peers. It is crucial that as wide as possible a proportion of the membership of the organisation feel involved so that ‘inner groups’ don’t develop. Representatives should operate in total equality with their peers and be open to all concrete experiences that users present them. It is their task to translate these experiences in concrete project proposals, policy statements and approaches. In this way these proposals become visible for people and this makes them respect the organisation more.

Equality of opportunities

Most user organisations have developed mechanisms to enable people to participate on an equal basis. Equality of opportunities and rights to express an opinion is deeply rooted in the organizational model that is being used by the large majority of the organisations. User organisations have often started as meetings between users where everybody has equal rights. From these meetings ideas have surged that have been translated into practical approaches later. It is important to mention that programmes such as needle exchange, methadone programmes and user rooms have originally started in underground circles that tried to respond directly to user demands.

The political objective of drug user organisations is precisely the development of a political consciousness among their members of their condition as a human being with rights. Organisations have experience in dealing with complicated personalities, collective and individual frustrations, with feelings of having failed in general. This characteristic makes user organizations particularly well placed to participate in dialogues and consultations. Their representatives usually take huge care to be seen as respectable counterparts, putting forward critical but pertinent questions, in a persistent way. Many organizations report that in this way, their participation in the dialogue has contributed to the change of attitude on a personal level among civil servants and politicians who are involved in the dialogue. Unfortunately, these changes of attitude have not been reported on a professional level.

Harm reduction, risk prevention, pleasure management

Drug user organisations have contributed with methods to reduce harms and risks from their origin. Many of the programmes that are currently carried out by official state programmes (like drug testing, syringe exchange, opiate prescription, user rooms etc.), form part of claims that have surged from these organisations

themselves, and in some cases, these programmes are being elaborated by drug user organisations, who have become more professional by converting themselves in service providers.

This professionalization has helped to get rid of the stigma on drug users, demonstrating the fact that these can represent themselves. The big challenge is to assume this professionalization without losing the horizontal approach in the way of functioning. To identify risks and harms it is necessary to take into account the most vulnerable populations, listen to their needs and work with them on a basis of equality.

However, the claims of the drug user organisations in this field go further than those that are usually accepted by politicians. User organisations make clear that the risks and harms are not only related with public health, but also with insecurity, persecution, stigma, society etc. Therefore they claim that harm and risk reduction measures should go further than the substance and should cover socio-economic aspects like the access to housing, employment, resources etc. Besides, they denounce the harms that are produced by the policies themselves.

Therefore the model of harm reduction is presented as a step towards a change of paradigm in drug policies, where the drug consumers themselves become actors in the decision-making process, enforcing the rights and obligations of drug users, above all of those who are most vulnerable.

In the framework of the proposals for a change of paradigm, some drug user organizations are starting to work on a model for the management of pleasures and risks, that will go further than harm reduction and advocate responsible use of substances.

Thus, more courageous initiatives such as the Cannabis Social Clubs are also defined in the context of harm reduction, whereas they are aiming at the establishment of closed circuits for cultivating and distributing cannabis for adult consumers. In this way, harms such as those related to the existence of a black market and the accessibility of the substance to minors are avoided as well.

In the analysis workshop there was some reflection on the question how to consider minors: as drug users or (potential) drug users. No association is in favour of promoting any drug use by young people, all agree on enforcing educational and preventive measures. In coherence with this philosophy, the cannabis social clubs only admit adults.

I miss women here

Women and gender issues seem to be the missing points in the drug users movement, although the female leadership in the organisations is slowly increasing. In the SWOT workshop, out of the 24 participants only 8 were women, so women only counted for 1/3 of the participants. This fact, the lack of participation of women in the activist movement was brought forward by one of the participants in the workshop, who said the words at the head of this section.

One of the conclusions of the discussion was that it is necessary for associations to give more space to women, but also for women to occupy those spaces, since they usually assume the caregivers role instead of taking responsibilities in the decision making structure. Nevertheless more research is needed on the role of women in users' organisations.

During the analysis workshop a session was dedicated to analyse the inclusion of the gender perspective in the organisations. From the 16 organisations and federations that participated, only 2 have a working group that is formed by female and male drug users, in which both theoretical reflections and practical attitude changes on the internal level are proposed. In the discussion, the male participants showed resistance at the time where the roots of disequity and patriarchy were discussed, as well as the ways to apply changes towards more equal dynamics in the structure of organisations. When the men claimed that "the women have to become protagonists", the women responded that they hoped for more support by the men: "we have to do many things, but men have to do other".

After concluding that feminism has produced the methodological tools to identify and analyse the gender inequalities, during the workshop the need to develop technical intervention tools was identified, both for men and women, to overcome the disparities.

On the other hand, the situation of female drug users concerns the female activists participating in the research. They describe some differences on patterns of use:

"Women's drug use is a bit different [...] its certainly more hidden, because women are usually the primary care givers in families, they're not going to be known to be drug users. So they will find another way to manage their drug use, so they don't have to go to the services».

The fight against prohibition as a forbidden fruit

The lack of interest that is generally expressed by the public towards the claims of users in some ways strengthens the capacity of organizations to develop their own communication tools and strategies, through actions that intend to change the social perception of the drug issue, and through developing new methods to express their claims.

The range of issues that user organisations are covering refer to a broad spectrum of aspects of our society: social, health, legal, the situation in prisons, apart from the discussion on the freedom of the individual, his human rights, the ecology, international co-operation, democracy, the power of religion etc.

This allows the integration of the claims of drug users into the goals of many other social justice and human rights organisations. Also, it has given organizations the capacity to analyse political issues, both on a national and an international level. Some organizations have developed their own political strategies to obtain important political advances, such as is the case of the Cannabis Social Clubs in Belgium and Spain.

This also defines the “anti-establishment” character of these organizations, which makes them particularly attractive to people who are not consuming drugs but wish to support movements that are working for social reforms in general.

Election periods are generally considered to be an opportunity due to the fact that during these times, young politicians or journalists can be induced to put the issue of drug legalization on the agenda. Anti-prohibitionism, at least during a certain period, can be considered as an issue with which votes or media attention can be gained.

As the majority of politicians have not elaborated a proposal to deal with the drug issue in a post-prohibitionist period, the debate on this issue has barely started. User organisations can profit from this situation by elaborating this proposal in a detailed way and propose it as a basic document.

For instance, the establishment of collectives to grow cannabis for personal use represents a solid response on the need to reduce the black market. Legal paths that accompany the birth process of these clubs demonstrate that this option can become a transformation from the prohibitionist model to a model of regulation. It may start to have an important impact on the general drugs debate. The fact that citizens look for their own solutions to their needs without necessarily waiting for an intervention by the state, generates self-confidence and respect from others.

Ignorance on behalf of politicians

Drug user representatives generally feel that politicians tend to avoid the debate on the crucial issue in the drugs debate, which is the harm produced by drug prohibition, and instead tend to concentrate the discussion on secondary issues.

The political use of drug prohibition as an instrument that can be used by any political force to control society – maintaining it as a political taboo that hinders any innovative approach, and that is never discussed – is felt as the real threat to the efforts to create a sincere and constructive consultation of drug users by authorities. Politicians might consider antiprohibitionism as a legitimate position, but to publicly declare support for it is often seen as political suicide.

Some comments that reflect the opinion of drug user organisations on the dialogue with politicians:

“It is as if they need to come out of the closet only to defend an opinion”

“Even when they realise they agree with you, they will never take risks for you. To support drug users is too dangerous for them.”

“They only accept what fits into their logic, and throw away the rest”

“Politicians listen to us, we are satisfied after a meeting with them, then after they do not act we become frustrated”

As long as this situation does not change, the reach of user participation seems to remain limited to the contextualisation of drug policies, to discuss policies in a framework of risk and harm reduction and respect for human rights, in the case of the situation in prisons, in treatment centres, etc. This represents another dilemma: the contribution of users to these proposals is presented as an important achievement by authorities, who therewith justify their passiveness concerning fundamental proposals, while drug user organisations are rapidly losing their role as a defence organisation. This phenomenon could be described as being “hugged to death”

There seems to be consensus among drug user organisations that it is better to be ignored than to be “hugged to death”.

An important opportunity for drug user organisations is the apparent openness on behalf of authorities towards the concept of participation of civil society in public policies, a result of the general desire to reduce the distance between citizen and public authority that has become evident in recent years. This opportunity can benefit user organizations, as they represent by far the largest proportion of citizens affected by drug policies, and those who until now have largely been ignored in these debates.

However, in spite of that, most of the organisations coincide in the need and importance to participate in these political forums, whether they are formal or informal. Therefore it is necessary to assume not only rights, but also obligations on behalf of the organizations, such as the obligation to register as an association (a necessity in order to participate in the official forums) and/or fulfil some minimal conditions of representativity and transparency.

We are only being used

It is difficult to measure the impact of the efforts to participate in the political debate, which can become particularly important at the moment of evaluating the impact of dialogues. The real impact seems to be the influence that user representatives have had on individual civil servants or politicians with whom they have had meetings. But although this influence might have been positive, this does not guarantee that this will continue to be the case for the whole institution: someone new enters a position and all of the precious hard won gains are lost and the work has to start afresh.

There is a fear among organisations of users that they are being used as an excuse for others to look for finance for their projects. Special reference is made to the “industry of addiction”, health services for addicts, such as treatment centres, social workers etc. While looking for financial resources for their projects, they are reported to take user representatives on board, but once these projects have been granted funding, the user participation in these projects seems often to be forgotten.

The reaction of the criminal organizations that are involved in the drugs market to the proposals to regulate drugs (and diminish the influence of these organisations) is felt as a possible future threat to drug user organisations, especially those who seek to establish legal alternatives for the drugs market, such as the Cannabis Social Clubs.

Likewise, people believe that pharmaceutical companies may be waiting for the moment that the proposals of drug users to regulate these substances will be heard by politicians in order to take a lead in the debate and ensure that any kind of regulation will end with the creation of lucrative patents on behalf of theirfor the companies.

The media are hostile

The political taboo of opposing prohibition seems also to extend itself to the media. Many times, the form in which they report on the drugs issue with information that is presented as “scientific” and therefore “trustworthy” leaves much to be desired: see for instance the recent series of articles on the supposed dangerousness of cannabis (including false claims on increased THC percentage and causal relationship between cannabis use and psychological diseases). The prohibitionist tendency in official investigations, that many times seem to be designed in order to legitimate the official approach instead of allowing a description of reality, and the manipulation of the information on drugs in the press are felt as an important threat to efforts to obtain a serious and sincere debate on the issues that are put forward by user organizations.

The way that the issue is put into context by the media, whose attention is more focussed on the substances themselves than on the policies that are implemented, contributes to an apparently strong social consensus that prohibition should remain. This view is often justified by an extremely emotional approach by the political leadership that uses terms like war, menace, danger and social disease to describe the issue, strengthening in this way a major stigmatisation of drug users among the media, authorities and the public in general.

The concept of civil society participation

An important opportunity for drug user organizations is the apparent open attitude towards the participation of civil society organisations in public policy-making processes, a result of the general wish to reduce the distance between citizen and authority. Drug user organisations can benefit from this opportunity, whereas they represent by far the most voluminous part of the population that is affected by drugs, and which has participated less until now.

On the other hand, it is important to install meeting places among the various collectives that work in the field of drugs in order to enrichen the debate and the proposals: drug users (legal and illegal), educators, technical staff, health workers, researchers etc.

Failure of centralised drug policies

Another opportunity is formed by the fact that official reports on the result of drug policies continue to show these policies fail with regards to the fulfilment of their principal objectives: i.e. the reduction of demand and supply of drugs. It is impossible that politicians can continue to close their eyes to this failure, especially when enormous amounts of public spending are involved.

In relation with this phenomenon there is an opportunity in the gradual decentralization of policies to the regional and local level. On these levels, authorities tend to be more willing to listen to users as legitimate counterparts.

It is important to strengthen the relationship between drug user organisations and people who work as technical staff in drug programmes in cities and regional governments, in order to be informed on each other's needs and identify common ways of working.

As was said before, with the years, one sector of drug consumers has become more professional and even has passed from being service user to service provider, implementing programmes aimed to improve public health. Thus, they are being recognised as legitimate and valid contributors in the implementation of public strategies. However, a possible consequence of this professionalisation is the loss of strength in the movement of associations, which one participant in the workshop called "illustrated despotism: all for the people but without the people".

New technologies

More exploitation of new technologies like Internet or mobile telephone, possibilities to exchange experiences and ideas through internationalisation and globalisation and more professionalization in the supply of services are opportunities that can be used by organizations to improve and gain more attention for their messages.

Although they pass only from mouth to mouth, these messages can also reach personalities within the political, scientific and legal apparatus, and even in prohibitionist associations where open attitudes exist towards the need for change of drug policies.

Crisis, what crisis?

The current economic crisis can play a role in reducing the political will of authorities to create and maintain the dialogue with marginal groups, diminishing the available resources to finance these programmes.

The crisis can also be considered as an opportunity to make progress in the drugs debate, as this obliges society to control public spending and save on useless expenses. It can also lead to the fact that the entire political system will be

questioned more than before, which can increase the profile of pertinent and critical questions as to how this system is functioning.

Drug user organisations might have opportunities in the coming years to propose alternative approaches to drug use that are workable, reducing harm and saving money on the public expenditure that is now oriented towards law enforcement or ineffective health interventions.

CONCLUSIONS

Taking into account the challenges and dilemmas, weaknesses, strengths, threats and opportunities for drug user organizations to intervene actively in the decision making process on drug policies, which contributions can these organizations make to the general and specific objectives of this process? How can the participation of user organizations contribute to make drug policies more effective?

1. Channels of information and ideas

Organizations can serve as a channel of information between users and authorities. This channel can serve to communicate directly and instantly to authorities about the impact of their policies, indicate both negative and positive consequences, problems and good experiences. Above all to less visible, more marginalised populations, such as marginalized users or people in prison, this communication can be of crucial importance.

In this way, user organizations can contribute to a complete analysis of the impact of policies on the user population, reporting on possible unintended consequences at an early stage. At the same time, they can communicate questions, demands, suggestions and proposals that originate from the community of users and can be useful in the process of elaborating policies.

User organisations can operate as “idea factories” on how to reduce risks and harms to drug users, their families, communities, wider society as a whole and their surroundings.

2. Service providers

Organizations can play a crucial role in offering health services to users, both to those who need support for basic needs like a living, work opportunities, access to risk or harm reduction services, as well as to those who need advice and counselling concerning their drug use itself. User organisations can also indicate specific needs for services to people who are particularly vulnerable. However it is important to maintain the character of a user organisation: an actor who is looking in the first place to defend the rights of users, not to implement government policies.

3. Gender perspective

Apparently, very little information exists on this aspect of the impact of drug policies, neither in the official institutions nor in the user organisations themselves. Through information provided by user organizations data can be collected on this impact, which generates situations of risk, for instance in the case of women in prison, of women experiencing difficulties to get access to treatment, being denied to help centres for victims of violence due to the fact that they are consuming drugs, problems in maintaining the custody of their children, the impact of social punishment that particularly affects women who consume drugs, etc.

Organizations can play an important role at the time of indicating these problems, gathering the demands of women in this respect and formulating proposals to improve the situation, but in order to improve their knowledge, the participation of women in the activities and the decision-making structures of drug user organisations need to be strengthened.

The big challenges for drug user organisations in this field are to establish training in this field, the inclusion of the gender perspective in the work as well as in the functioning of these organisations, the identification and denouncement of inequalities in the field of drug use and the policies aimed to reduce it, as well as the incorporation of men in the efforts to create more equal organisations.

4. Change of perception

Organizations can fulfil an important role in changing public perception of drugs and drug users. Through their presence in the public domain these organizations can illustrate the reality that “addiction” as such does not need to be considered as a social problem, that responsible forms of consuming exist, that there are fully functional (often invisible) drug users and that it is possible to educate others on these forms.

5. Elaboration of political proposals

User organizations can be crucial actors in the drafting of proposals to modernise drug legislation. Organizations can develop proposals to elaborate drug policies that are based on the regulation of access to adults, establishing mechanisms to limit the access of minors, such as the Cannabis Social Clubs . These proposals can serve as a basis for a discussion on future drug policies, aiming at the protection of public health and the reduction of the involvement of the black market.

Through their organizations, users can become principal actors in the reduction of risks and harms in their own consumption and with regards to the impacts of this consumption on society as a whole.

In the first place they can channel proposals to improve the situation with regards to the human rights of users in both the legal and health system. This refers above all to vulnerable populations like users in prison, the homeless and unemployed. Equally important is the work of organizations in order to defend the rights of users, as a service of legal assistance.

In some cases organisations are already implementing proposals to create a responsible drugs market in practice, such as the collective cultivation of cannabis through Cannabis Social Clubs in Belgium and Spain. In the creation of these collective circuits deontological codes are being established with regards to the production and distribution of prohibited substances, such as the establishment of age limits the control of the substance etc.. These experiments will produce important information at the moment when authorities decide to implement regulation policies, with regards to cannabis and other drugs.

The networking of user associations, including international experiences, facilitates the exchange of experiences with different legislations among countries, which could prove to be very useful at the moment of evaluating the consequences of certain legal steps.

Organizations usually have broad experience with putting into practice the principles of risk reduction and health protection, precisely the objectives that formally justified the creation of prohibition. As authorities cannot obtain the minimisation of health risks in the current legal system, now it is users themselves who may develop legal models to put in practice this health protection, based on the principle that where there is no victim, there cannot be a crime.

6. Civil society participation

Currently, authorities wish to involve civil society in the design and implementation of policies, in order to improve their public acceptance and effectiveness. In the field of drug policies, user organisations can contribute significantly to the forums of consultation that should support these policies.

User organizations have experiences in developing an open environment in which all opinions are listened to and taken into account, giving room to groups that are particularly vulnerable, as well as in elaborating and carrying out alternative models of drug policies aimed at reducing risks and harms. User organizations are valid counterparts in any sincere effort to make civil society participate in the elaboration of drug policies.

Their primary role is to indicate contradictions in current policies, aimed at protecting public health, but whose methods often obtain the opposite. Besides, they can produce information on the situation of drug users and their surroundings, valid data for authorities that need to base their policies on a trustworthy view of reality. And finally they can present alternative models to current policies, and carry them out in practice in order to produce laboratory experiments that can be useful at the time of taking political decisions.

User associations can be linked through national and international networks This facilitates the exchange of experiences between persons and groups in similar circumstances, and strengthens the sincerity with which the representatives of these organizations are operating. It is important to respect this model whilst involving representatives in forums of consultation and participation.

7. Risk and harm reduction

In the field of risk and harm reduction (harms being considered as risks that have not been sufficiently reduced) drug users can contribute to the analysis of the way in which the implementation of policies can reduce these risks, or on the contrary, become themselves factors of risk or harm generation. Not only in general terms, but also specifically such as in the case of vulnerable populations.

Due to their proximity to daily reality and their facility to communicate, user organizations are able to alert authorities when risks occur in the situation of homeless people, as well as in prisons, and they can play an important role in projects aimed at improving the employment opportunities and general living conditions of marginalized (former) drug users.

It is necessary that drug user organisation pay attention and care to vulnerable groups in society at the time of preparing preventive interventions, especially to minors in school and pre-professional ages.

User organizations can make several contributions to prevention programmes. Based on their insight gained in real life they can play an important role in elaborating prevention programmes that are oriented to the family environment, with regards to conflict prevention, support of self-confidence and other elements that can help to prevent irresponsible drug use.

Organizations can contribute effectively in preventing risks by creating spaces for safe use of drugs, places that are only accessible for adults, and educate these, fathers and mothers, on responsible drug use within the context of each substance, and spread knowledge about how to maximise pleasure and minimise risks. User organisations can play a crucial role in efforts to (re-) install a culture of substance consumption oriented towards the protection of people's well being.

Organizations can support with programmes to avoid adulteration (examples include testing the quality of different substances, or the promotion of self-cultivation of cannabis), which can have a self-regulating effect on the illegal drugs market: dealers will take into account the fact that the substances they sell can be tested for quality.

User organizations can act together with conventional public health services in order to respond to questions of drug users that these services have difficulties in answering. An idea could be to install an urgent 24 hour help desk on the Internet where users could address their urgent questions staffed by people with experience and insight and the ability to direct the questioner to local sources of help and support.

8. Training of professionals

User organizations can fulfil a role in the training of professionals who work in the legal or medical field and maintain a regular contact with drug users: doctors, social workers, policemen, etc. Often, these professionals lack detailed information on drug consumption and its social and health implications, and drug users can give them this information.

To spread the knowledge of basic data on drug consumption and ways to reduce risks and harms it is necessary to include this issue in specific courses or in the general training of people who work in social and health services, as well as in police forces or other institutions that are involved in the drug issue: in universities, academies etc.

User organizations can contribute to the design of plans and objectives of these training courses. They can also provide important information related to particular events like an Early Warning System on contaminated drugs, or on particular consumption patterns during special dates, such as Christmas and New Year period (when different drugs are usually mixed, and phenomena occur that ambulance personnel are not always prepared for).

Users training users: The J-Key project, Denmark

Organizations can also contribute to a better training of users, with communication strategies that fit to the target group. Reference can be made among others to the experience of the “Gadejurister” (Street Lawyers, from Denmark), who elaborated an information system on issues like legal and human rights, substances, health and history with cards that are distributed to injecting users together with hygienic injection materials. This project is called the J-Key project)

Thanks to the participation of users in this project, it has been possible to find and spread crucial information to avoid harms such as the spread of diseases, overdose or other problems. Also information has been provided on the human rights of users, which has also contributed to increased awareness among policemen and an improved communication with the police in general, as they were involved in the elaboration of answers to the questions of the consumers.

In order to be able to train others, it is also important that investments are made into the training of drug user organisations themselves. Events can be organised with the character of a “summer school”, using a participative methodology with participants exchanging information and training each other. Participants could be invited according to the characteristics of the people whom they represent.

To carry out their work seriously, user organisations should have a solid secretariat and staff members who are good coordinators. Ideally these should be people who look inwards in the organisation and only put themselves in front of others when the organisation requires this. Someone who can train others and who has a network outside of people who can give feedback on crucial decisions the organization needs to take.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the analysis and conclusions that have emerged from the research (questionnaires, interviews and workshop) we can present the following recommendations to improve the participation of user organisations in the design and implementation of drug policies. We separate these recommendations into the two political levels that have been analysed in this study: the local/national level on one hand and the international/multilateral (the European Union) on the other.

This separation is related to the logistical division of the participants in the SWOT workshop, where the basic principles of these recommendations have been formulated. This does not necessarily mean that there is a division in the content. Recommendations for a local level are also valid for the European level, and the other way around.

Recommendations to the administrations

During the SWOT workshop the Basque organizations elaborated a series of recommendations to the Basque Government, some of which can be applied as well to other administrations. Therefore, we have separated these recommendations in two groups, those that could be assumed by the central government or by the rest of the autonomous communities in Spain, and those that are specifically meant for the Basque government.

In order for these recommendations of the Basque organizations that participated in the research to become effective, some principles of action are suggested:

1. To guarantee the participation of drug users' organizations in the design of strategic plans.
2. To enable the participation and consultation of drug users' organizations in risk & harm reduction programmes in order to improve their accessibility to users and therefore their effectiveness.
3. To put attention and care, on behalf of the user organisations, to the vulnerable groups in society at the time of focussing on interventions of prevention, with specific attention to minors in school and pre-professional phases.
4. To put in motion a process of internal training of personnel that are involved in strategic plans with the participation of user organizations which can contribute with information coming from the experience of users.
5. To guarantee the participation of representatives of drug user organizations within the Technical Commissions that operate in the framework of the Social Initiative, in the elaboration of risk maps, in the Plan "Drogo Legal".
6. To take measures to assist in the integration of particularly vulnerable users in the labour market, among them active consumers.
7. To include in the definition of persons in situations of risk consumers of cannabis who suffer from the adulteration of substances that are bought on the black market. To extend the concept of harm reduction so that measures

can be included that are related to the substance itself, such as those that are applied by the Cannabis Social Clubs.

General recommendations for the administrations:

- To improve health services in prisons, fulfilling the law approved in 2003² by which the health services dependent of prisons “should be transferred to the Autonomous Communities for their full integration into autonomous health services.
- To improve the coordination among the different institutions with responsibilities for drugs issues (Ministry of Health, Plan Nacional sobre Drogas, Plan Nacional contra el SIDA, Dirección General de Drogodependencias of Basque Government, etc.).
- To articulate mechanisms to ensure and specify the participation of the organisations in the design of strategic plans. Guarantee the participation in technical commissions that operate within the social initiative, with the capacity of contributing modifications in the mapping of risks and at the time of designing attitudes that are focussed on responsible consumption.
- To give special attention to the information proceeding from the experience of consumers, developing channels for this information that can be taken into account by the institutions; for this reason it is vital to provide resources these organisations and training to their representatives.
- To take measures to assist in the integration of particularly vulnerable users in the labour market, among them active consumers.
- Regulate the testing of substances and facilitate the access to the data to both the public and the administrations.
- Facilitate meetings and workshops with professionals working in mass media in order to analyse the information concerning the socio-political legal interventions with drug users.
- To give attention to migrants and ethnic minorities: here it is important to develop actions that sensibilise and inform on the health situation of migrants. Develop interventions that promote health, through conventional social and health agents. It is also important to capacitate persons belonging to the same cultures as health mediators or promoters, in order to promote the adherence of these groups to health centres and resources . Likewise, a better understanding of the health reality of these persons should be promoted, in coordination with other actors such as associations which also attend to these populations, promoting the existence of support resources that could involve interpreters as well as necessary social and family support.
- Support, training and financial aid for the design of specific programmes that are oriented towards the prevention of harms and reduction of risks that are associated to the consumption of cannabis, carried out by associations of cannabis consumers.
- Establishment of rooms for the responsible consumption of cannabis that are steered by associations with the acknowledgement of the

2 Ley 16/2003, de 28 de mayo, de cohesión y calidad del Sistema Nacional de Salud

- authorities, in order to distinguish between the use of substances of great health risk (hard drugs) of those without special risk (soft drugs)
- To give resources to associations in order to respond to the requests for information that is being generated in the past years from the health and therapeutic field, as well as the community of ill people, related to the therapeutic use of cannabis.
 - To facilitate the development of workshops on responsible and less problematic consumption for those who violate the so-called “Corcuera law” for cannabis consumption.
 - To facilitate the presence of user organisations in the official evaluations of drug policies, taking into account the specific character of the different organisations and including the reflections and proposals in the official evaluation reports on drug policies
 - To guarantee the incorporation of qualitative analysis and evaluation as a basic element of all interventions, with the purpose of making systematic progress: identifying the most adequate initiatives as well as the inadequate initiatives, discovering new fields and needs of intervention, in order to develop new complementary programmes that help to give full meaning to the principle of globality. Here indirect reference will repeatedly be made to the need to count with the possibility of making interventions both to elaborate statistics and programmes that can be evaluated with information on the persons who are directly affected, drugs users and people with problematic consumption, as well as those who surround them and the society as such. Always from the perspective of improving their quality of life.
 - To support user organisations to carry out internal and external investigations with the purpose of identifying forms in which the social and health services can be better adapted to the needs of consumers.

Specific recommendations for the Basque Government:

Prior to the implementation of the workshop in Murgia a map of associations of consumers of illegal substances, that included the associations of cannabis users that exist in the Basque Country, representing three communities. We propose the Dirección General de Drogodependencias and the Departamento de Vivienda y Asuntos Sociales to facilitate an encounter with these organisations, with the purpose of extending and discussing the margins of operation of the forthcoming autonomous drug plan and the possible participation of these organisations as a method of co-responsibility and self awareness in the transformation of the situation.

- Creation of a Technical Commission with the specific purpose of improving participation. With regards to the proposals that are elaborated by the technical commissions and their contribution to the former drug plan, these same proposals insist on the need to create an independent or cross-department technical commission that collect the experiences, information, training and quality improvement processes that are based on the collectives of cannabis and other substance users. In the former plan 2004 – 2008 the important effort was

recognised that these commission have carried out in the elaboration of the fifth drug plan.

- Coordination and information exchange among the various departments of the Basque Government, specially Justice and Interiro, in order to ensure that the initiatives that user organisations are implementing in a legal framework can take place unhindered.

To commit to the implementation of the resolutions that were approved by the Basque Parliament in relation with the 5th Drug Plan of the Basque Country 2004 – 2008. On behalf of the associations we make an urgent call to apply and engage in the implementation of the resolutions, in view of the risk that new and changing realities in the future may produce dangerous circumstances for people who consume substances and the entire society, which contribute to the reduction of damage to and possible improvement of the quality of life of users and their collectives.

Recommendations to the European Union

From 1992, when the first conversations started on what a European Union policy on drugs should look like, participation of civil society organisations in the design and implementation of this policy has always been highlighted as a priority in policy documents. Nevertheless, it took the European Union 16 years to practically implement this in a first concrete experience: the Civil Society Forum on Drug Policy.

In December 2007 and May 2008, the first meetings of the CSF took place in Brussels. This Forum consisted of 26 organizations that the European Commission had carefully selected from a total of 76 organisations that applied to be part of this forum.

During the meeting of the Forum in May 2008, the Commission asked the representatives for suggestions for the next EU Drug Action Plan 2009 – 2012. Afterwards the Commission carefully selected the suggestions that were made during this meeting, leaving out those who “would probably be rejected by the Member States”, as one of the Commission’s spokesmen commented.

In September 2008, a draft of the new Drug Action Plan was published by the European Commission. This Plan not only ignored most of the recommendations of the CSF of May, but also introduced a completely new version of the concept of civil society participation. The Drugs Action Plan calls for a European Alliance on Drugs, a partnership between citizens and authorities in the fight against drugs, without specifying what this alliance will consist of and what its aims will be. The rest of the Action Plan is repeating the same measures as those in its former versions.

3 Ley 16/2003, de 28 de mayo, de cohesión y calidad del Sistema Nacional de Salud

The initiative of the Alliance has been taken without any consultation with representatives of European civil society. Neither the European Parliament, nor the Civil Society Forum on EU Drug Policy that was installed by the European Commission in 2007 have had the opportunity to express their opinion with regards to this Alliance.

As a response to this sudden development, the ENCOD members who participated in the workshop on Drugs and Diplomacy, that took place in November 2008, decided to elaborate an alternative proposal for the Drug Action Plan, which we present to you herewith. This alternative plan departs with a comment on how to improve the dialogue with civil society, which should become a priority objective in the drug policies of the EU.

An alternative European Union Action Plan on Drugs

The EU Action Plan on Drugs 2009 - 2012 approved by the EU Council on 8 December 2008 and published in the Official Journal of the European Union on 20 December declares that " it is time to put the people of Europe at the centre of policy in this field and to get Europe's citizens more involved".

Therefore, the establishment of a "European Alliance on Drugs" is proposed, which aims to mobilise a broad range of civil society structures that are active both within and outside the drug field. During 3 and 4 March, the proposals on how to structure this Alliance will be discussed. ENCOD would like to contribute with the following proposal to improve the dialogue between civil society and the EU institutions.

We propose that the governments of the European Union adopt a Drug Action Plan that protects the health and safety of citizens who are involved in the drugs phenomenon.

European citizens need strategies that contribute to a safer environment around the phenomenon of drugs, that allow a more rational use of public funds, that respect human rights, take into account the implications for vulnerable populations, such as mothers who consume drugs, children in risk situations and migrants, and policies that don't threaten the livelihoods of farmers in developing countries. In short a drug policy that causes benefits to society instead of harms.

This new drugs action plan should include the following priorities:

Priority 1. IMPROVE THE DIALOGUE WITH CIVIL SOCIETY

Admission of participants

As a first step to reinitiate the dialogue process that was initiated in 2006, the Commission should elaborate and publish a list of civil society organisations that

work in the drug field in Europe, as was announced during the Conference on "Civil Society and Drugs in Europe" in January 2006.

All organisations who participated in the preparation phases of the dialogue process as it has been carried out so far (Conference on Civil Society and Drugs in Europe, January 2006; responses to the Green Paper of September 2006, and to the organisation of the first Civil Society Forum in 2007) should be mentioned on this list. These organisations should also be asked to nominate other organisations that should be invited to present their candidature as well. On the basis of this list a first selection can be made of organisations to participate in the dialogue.

The following selection criteria for the organisations that participate in the dialogue should be used:

- Priority should be given to representatives of European and national networks of citizens most affected by drug policies: users (of any kind of drugs) and their relatives.
- Secondly, networks of people with specific knowledge to the drug phenomenon, but who are not directly affected: health workers and experts.
- European networks should have member organisations in a significant number of EU Member States.
- Organisations should be able to prove that they have transparent rules on membership and decision-making structures.

Methodology

The methodology should be designed to create an environment where all participants can feel confident. Civil society has long been ignored in the drug policy-making process, so the first expectation is to be allowed to speak and be listened to.

The dialogue should be oriented to producing recommendations in the various specific areas of competence. These recommendations should be published as an annex to the annual report of the EMCDDA.

It is important to show the level of consensus amongst civil society organisations behind the recommendations that they may wish to make, so that such recommendations can become clear signals to the institutions of the European Union.

Objective

The principal objective of the dialogue should be the dialogue between all participants, facilitating exchange of information and knowledge on the drug phenomenon in Europe and formulate evidence-based recommendations on drug policies.

Result

The dialogue should aim to be an enlightening experience for all participants. Thus it will automatically have a positive impact on the process concerning drug policy in Europe. The concrete result could be formulated within regular recommendations towards European Institutions with regards to the current implementation of drug policies. Ideally, these recommendations would be shared by the largest possible number of civil society organisations.

Structure

The key criteria for developing the communication structure between EU institutions and civil society should be:

- The detailed structure of the dialogue should be elaborated by both representatives of EU institutions and of civil society together.
- It should respect the diversity of all existing networks and organisations.
- Transparency and accessibility should be safeguarded during the entire process.
- Once the structure is established, it should be widely published.

A possible structure for a dialogue could consist of three instruments:

1. The civil society assembly.

An annual meeting should be organised with a group of at least 250 Civil Society Organisations that will be selected from the list mentioned above. The meeting should be moderated by a neutral actor that could be a consultancy specialised in moderating debates, or a neutral organisation.

This annual assembly should be organised prior to the annual meeting of the Horizontal Drugs Group where the EU Action Plan is evaluated, with the aim of discussing and including the input from civil society in this process.

The assembly will produce a list of proposals to discuss with EU authorities. These proposals will be followed up in national dialogues (which should be set up in every country) as well as in the dialogue with the European Commission that will take place in the civil society forum (see below).

The assembly will also produce an analysis on the state of drug policy in the European Union and recommendations for improvement, which will be added to the EMCDA annual report. To facilitate this, working groups can be formed.

The Internet forum for dialogue between civil society and authorities on drug policy created by the European Commission in September 2008 should re-activated. This forum is open and accessible to all European citizens, and could be oriented to gather all questions and suggestions on the specific themes dealt with by the Assembly and the Forum. This open communication will enable the dialogue to be transparent, inclusive and respected by all involved stakeholders.

2. The civil society forum

Twice a year the EU civil society forum will be organised, comprised of representatives of the civil society assembly on one hand, and representatives of the European Commission on the other. It should be moderated by an independent moderator.

The task of this forum is to follow up on the proposals that are presented by the Assembly to the European Commission and analyse together the ways in which European drug policies integrate the recommendations that have been made by the Assembly.

3. The Control Commission

An independent body, with equal representation from civil society and European authorities (Commission, Horizontal Drugs Group, EMCDDA, Europol), chaired by a representative of the European parliament, would supervise the dialogue process. On an annual meeting, this group will analyse if the objectives of the dialogue have been met by current structure and methodology or if they should be adapted.

Priority 2. INFORMATION

8. To increase the investigation of and extend the knowledge on forms in which drug users can intervene directly in the reduction of risks and harms related to their own consumption of drugs.
9. To investigate and evaluate the innovative strategies, programmes and interventions in the area of drug policy, including alternative treatments such as the controlled distribution of substances.
10. To encourage the participation of organisations of drug users in the design and development of investigations.
11. To take into account the gender perspective in investigations and evaluations.
12. To guarantee the objective analysis of the data produced by investigations, without political manipulations.
13. To promote international workshops that facilitate the exchange of information and experiences among the different groups of people affected by drugs, according to the complexity of themselves and the substances they use.
14. To investigate the ties between the industry of legal drugs (alcohol, tobacco and pharmaceutical companies, etc.) and health institutions.

Priority 3. COORDINATION

- To promote the decentralisation of drug policies to the local and national levels, and coordinate the co-operation between neighbouring countries and regions in order to avoid possible friction.

- To defend in the meetings of the UN the sovereignty of every nation to establish forms of regulation of the drugs market that are socially and culturally acceptable to the local populations involved.
- To allow a broader margin to local authorities to experiment with alternative policies and innovative interventions (that may include steps towards the legalisation of certain substances), from which others may learn useful lessons in their search for more just and effective drug policies, based on the respect of human rights and the protection of public health.
- To increase and strengthen the participation of civil society in the design and application of drug policies
- To extend the membership of the EU Civil Society Forum on Drug Policies to all civil society organizations that wish to take part in it.
- To formalise the character of the conclusions of the CS Forum as a direct consultation of civil society to the Member States, without the unnecessary interference of the European Commission in the formulation of conclusions and recommendations of this forum.

Priority 4. SUPPLY REDUCTION.

- To rationalise the supply of drugs and reduce as much as possible the criminality associated with the black market, making use of effective measures.
- To facilitate, analyse and evaluate the establishment of legal circuits to control the drugs market with the aim of reducing the presence of the illegal market.
- Apply effective measures against the laundering of drugs money and corruption related to drug trafficking.

Priority 5. DEMAND REDUCTION.

- To reduce the problems that are related to drug consumption within a context of illegality; to improve, innovate and support ways to make drug users and distributors responsible (among others with initiatives such as the testing of illegal substances)
- To facilitate and encourage the establishment of self-support groups of drug users, with special emphasis on those formed by female drug users, and develop intervention methods that are more effective in reducing risks and harms associated to the use of substances.
- To strengthen the establishment of self-support groups formed by peers (parents, women, young people, users, etc.) and support the contributions of these kinds of groups.

- To limit the intervention of institutions exclusively to non-repressive strategies concerning the problematic use of drugs, which should be understood as use that is considered problematic by the user him/herself.
- To establish and respect ethical codes for the publicity and promotion of drugs, legal or illegal.
- To give special attention to the gender differences in the patterns of drug use and to the needs of services for female drug users, including a gender perspective to the interventions.
- To give specific attention to vulnerable groups, such as mothers who consume drugs and minors in situations of high risk; to apply prevention policies that are aiming at “preventive neighbourhoods” and the reduction of marginalisation and social exclusion that is affecting these vulnerable groups.

Priority 6. INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION.

- To respect the sovereignty of non-European countries and their autonomy to formulate own drug policies. The principle of European policy should always be the protection of health, the respect of human rights and the prevention of conflicts.
- To support the proposals of farmer communities in developing countries involved in the production of the source crops of major drug groups in order to create legal channels of commercialisation for the derivatives of plants that have been prohibited by the UN Conventions, such as coca leaves in South America, cannabis in Morocco and opium in Afghanistan.
- To exchange experiences of good practices between European Union and third countries, based on the respect of sovereignty and avoiding the imposition of policies that have proved to be a failure.

FINAL REMARKS

Finally we would like to make two general remarks to both user organisations and authorities.

In order to improve the relationship between drug users and authorities responsible for drug policies, in order for any possible dialogue to become a success, mutual trust and respect are a crucial factor.

User organisations should look beyond their current horizons. Do not consider politicians as opponents, but have compassion with the role they have to play. Politicians are the last part of a long chain of people who may be responsible for wrong or ill-conceived information. If you wish to contribute to change, the best approach to authorities is one of self-consciousness, without prejudices or suspicions.

Authorities should establish a margin of political freedom in which drug user organisations can operate. These organisations are set up by people who wish to reduce the negative effects of the drugs phenomenon, especially when it takes place underground. It is crucial that these organisations can operate as full participants in the process of developing a more responsible attitude to drug use from all parts involved, which includes their full participation in the design and elaboration of drug policies.

On behalf of ENCOD

Virginia Montañes and Joep Oomen

CONTACT ADDRESSES

EUROPE

ENCOD (European Coalition for Just and Effective Drug Policies)
Lange Lozanastraat 14
2018 Antwerpen, Belgium
Tel.+ 32 3 2930886 / +32 495 122 644
info@encod.org
www.encod.org

INPUD (International Network of People Who Use Drugs) - www.inpud.org

GERMANY

AKZEPT
Südwestkorso 14
D - 12161 Berlin
Deutschland
Tel. +49 30 822 2802
E-mail: akzeptbuero@yahoo.de
Web: www.akzept.org

ITALY

PAZIENTI IMPAZIENTI CANNABIS (PIC)
Piazza dei Sanniti n. 30
Roma 00185
Italia
Tel: +39 329 9421686
Fax: +39 06 47243823
E-mail: info@pazienticannabis.org

NETHERLANDS

MDHG BELANGENVERENIGING DRUGGEBRUIKERS
Jonas Daniel Meijerplein 30
1011 RH Amsterdam
Nederland
Tel. : +31 / (20) 624 47 75
Fax.: +31 / (20) 638 28 40
E-mail: Willemijn@mdhg.nl

UNITED KINGDOM

LEGALISE CANNABIS ALLIANCE (LCA)
PO Box 198
Norwich NR3 3WB
United Kingdom
E-mail: alun@ccguide.org.uk

SPAIN

FAUDAS (Federación estatal de Asociaciones de Personas afectadas por las drogas y el VIH)

Florencia, 44, bajos

08921 Santa Coloma de Gramenet (Barcelona)

Tlf +34 691 523 336

federacion@faudas.org

www.faudas.org

FAC (Federación de Asociaciones Canábicas)

c/ Salitre 23, bajos

28012 - Madrid

Tlf: +34 670 99 63 35

prensa@fac.cc

www.fac.cc/

BASQUE COUNTRY

Ai Laket - www.ailaket.com - ailaket@ailaket.com · Tel +34 945 23 15 60 ·

Comisión Ciudadana Antisida de Alava - www.sidalava.org/ - sidalava@sidalava.org

Ganjazz - infoganjazz@gmail.com - Tel. +34 637024633.

LRKG – info@laregadera.com - Tel +34 945 27 07 12

Paotxa - paotza@hotmail.com - Tel: +34 943216343

Pannagh - pannagh.blogspot.com/ - terapeutika@pannagh.org Tel. +34 944152900

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ANNEX 1

QUESTIONNAIRE

We call upon all organisations that represent consumers of illicit drugs to fill out the following questionnaire.

This questionnaire forms part of a research on the participation of drug consumers organisations in the design of drug policies in Europe.

This research also includes a workshop that will take place from 21 to 23 November 2008 in Vitoria, Basque Country, Spain.

Details of the organisation

Name of organisation:

Address:

Country:

Who does your organisation represent?

2. Political lobby activities

How do you define the concept of political lobby in your organisation?

What reasons have caused your organisation to start working in political lobby?

Did you get any type of training on how to carry out political lobby activities? Who has given you this training? Who has financed this training?

3. Experiences with consultation/dialogue with authorities

Have you ever participated in a consultation/dialogue with authorities responsible for drug policies in your region/country?

Was this a physical encounter or through Internet?

Was it a formal or informal consultation?

Was it a one time occasion or a series of events (how long time?)?

Was the consultation related to a particular decision or did it take place within a general debate?

Did the consultation occur because of an initiative taken by the administration or did the initiative come from you?

4. Impact of the participation

How do you consider your general experiences with the participation in consultations/dialogue?

Have you experienced a difference in the behaviour/attitude of authorities who are responsible for drug policies before and after the consultation?

Do you think that your recommendations have been taken into account? In case they were not, what may have been the reasons?

Have you experienced a change in your own behaviour / attitude before and after the consultation?

Which problems or limitations have you found in your own organisation when you took part in the consultations or political dialogues?

What were the most important lessons?

Thanks for copying the questions and your answers in an e-mail and send it before 18 November 2008 to: info@encod.org.

If you have any questions, please let us know.

E-mail: info@encod.org

Tel. + 32 (0)3 293 0886 / Mob. + 32 (0)495 122644

Many thanks!