

Antwerpen, 3 October 2005

TO MEMBERS OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

Concerning: The need for a budget to facilitate a dialogue with civil society in EU drug policy-making

There are huge concerns about the “democratic deficit” regarding many areas of activity within the European Union, and there are regular exhortations from politicians and officials for attempts to be made to engage civil society in policy debates. Very little effort has been made on this front concerning the EU strategy concerning illicit drugs, which covers a subject high on the list of concerns of citizens.

Currently, at EU level there exists no budget line for facilitating the consultation of Civil Society Organisations (CSO's) in the framework of the design and elaboration of drug policies. There is no way in which CSO's representing people affected by or concerned with current drug policies can obtain support from the European Commission to exchange and provide information and expertise to policy-makers. Nevertheless, they are defending the interests of millions of European citizens (according the latest EMCDDA figures, the population of regular illegal drug users in Europe is similar to that of Poland or Spain).

In the past 20 years several official statements have been made on the issue of civil society involvement in EU drug policies. This issue was included in, among others, the Helsinki Declaration of the European Council in which it adopted the former EU Strategy on Drugs (2000 – 2004), the Mid-term evaluation on this Strategy that was published in 2002, the draft version of the new EU Strategy on Drugs (2005-2012), released by the Netherlands presidency in July 2004, and in verbal and written communications made by the European Commission in the process of elaboration of the EU Action Plan.

During the past 12 years, ENCOD has been operating as a European network of organisations representing citizens affected by or concerned with drug policies. In all these years, no strategy has been produced by EU authorities to strengthen cooperation with civil society in this field.

Last year, ENCOD proposed the EU Horizontal Drugs Group in three occasions (letters of 30 August, 28 September and 22 October) to organise a moment of dialogue between EU authorities and civil society concerning the new Drug Strategy and Action Plan. This proposal was ignored.

On 15 December 2004, the European Parliament approved a report containing a series of recommendations to the European Council and the European Commission on the EU Drug Strategy (2005-2012). Among these recommendations, the involvement of civil society is mentioned several times.

Recommendation i) : *“create a specific budget line in order to facilitate an ongoing process of consultation with affected civil society organisations and independent professional experts about the impact of drug policies at the level of citizens;”*

Recommendation x): *“define and exponentially step up the involvement and participation of drug addicts and users of illicit substances, civil society, NGOs, the voluntary sector and the general public in resolving drug-related problems, in particular by involving organisations operating in this area more closely in the work of the Horizontal Drugs Group and by organising an annual European prevention initiative and by setting up, on an experimental basis, easily accessible informal centres pursuing an anti-prohibitionist strategy and a harm-reduction strategy;”*

After the approval of the EP report, on 17 December 2004, ENCOD sent an e-mail message to the Head of the Anti-drugs Coordination Unit of the European Commission, Mr. Carel Edwards, reminding him of our proposal to organise a concrete moment of dialogue to discuss the involvement of civil society in the coming Drug Action Plan.

Mr. Edwards responds to this message the same day, saying that

"The dialogue will start in 2005, well prepared and structured. I foresee, without committing myself, that we can make this in the second half of the year, maybe in the form of a meeting/seminar/conference if we have the means for this at our disposal. We will surely take some contact with you in the preparation phase. It is not always clear for outsiders what happens inside the Commission, but I can assure you that participation of the citizen (in all areas) is considered as important by the new Commission."

Until today, no initiative of this kind has been taken by the Commission.

In the Drug Action Plan (2005-2008), approved by the European Council in June 2005, it is stated that the Commission will write "a Green Paper on the issue of civil society involvement" in 2006, that will probably first be published in 2007.

We request you to consider the possibility that the European Parliament takes action in order to ensure a start is made with the dialogue with civil society and other interested actors in the implementation of drug policies in the EU, in the sense of the EP report of December 2004.

Thanks very much, best wishes,

ENCOD Steering Committee (Farid Ghehiouche - France, Marina Impallomeni – Italy, Christine Klüge – Germany, Virginia Montañes - Spain, Joep Oomen - Belgium, Artur Radosz – Poland, Jan van der Tas - Netherlands)