

Still no tipping point for world drug problem

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[United Nations General Assembly Special Session](#) on the world drug problem (UNGASS) came and went as many other international conferences: high expectations beforehand that the actual event subsequently failed to meet. Taking place in New York between 19 and 21 April 2016, the UNGASS was intended to take stock of the progress made and challenges faced by member states in countering the world drug problem. However, some governments and civil society organizations were [hoping](#) that the special session would also mark a real opportunity for reforming a system based on three international treaties that are respectively 55, 45 and 28 years old.



Political fragmentation

Were expectations too high in the run-up to the UNGASS? On the one hand, the UNGASS on drug policy seems to be a [‘once-in-a-generation’ event](#), as the previous two UNGASS sessions took place in 1998 and 1990 respectively. If there is a key moment to set reforms in motion or decide on future directions for global drug policy, it is the UNGASS. But, the outcome of the [UN Commission on Narcotic Drugs \(CND\)](#), held one month earlier to prepare for the UNGASS, already seemed to [lower expectations](#) considerably. It confirms that the world drug problem is still one of those global issues that are simply too politicized, with too many actors and agendas working at cross-purposes.

After all these years, the realm of global drug policy is still roughly divided into two opposite camps. There is the leftist camp with actors favoring harm-reduction, decriminalization and even legalization of illicit drugs; and there is the rightist camp with those advocating for drug-free cities, drug-free societies, zero-tolerance and the continuation of the model of prohibition. The real problem is not that these opposite camps exist, but that they have somehow succeeded to simultaneously hijack the [debate](#) on global drug policy from different angles, preventing a more pragmatic ‘middle ground’ or ‘third way’ from coming to fruition. To a certain extent, they have even hijacked academic research, as studies are often used – sometimes both camps even quoting the same studies – to support or counter a certain policy.

Modest shifts in the right direction

There has undoubtedly been some progress in recent years, especially in terms of more civil society inclusion, more acceptance of harm reduction as well as more realization that public

health and human security should be at the heart of the international community's approach to the world drug problem. To a certain extent, the 2016 UNGASS has confirmed these trends, but without clearly committing to them. The special session quickly closed the opportunity for serious debate by adopting the prepared 'final document' on the first day of the conference. But the UNGASS did reconfirm a modest shift, substantiating the need for proportionality in criminal justice systems, stressing the importance of access to controlled medicines and highlighting the centrality of human rights. Several countries, including Colombia, Guatemala, Mexico and even the United States, expressed the need for more flexibility and new approaches.

No tipping point

In spite of these modest changes, the UNGASS clearly showed that the international 'system' of illicit drug control has not reached a tipping point yet and will not drastically change in the short term. But it is important to realize that change is not only driven by the international level. In fact, changes in drug policies are ubiquitous at the national and local levels. In Uruguay, the government moved to a controlled regulation of the cannabis market in 2013. A considerable number of states of the United States have legalized cannabis for medical use. Countries such as Canada, Guatemala, Italy, Mexico and Morocco are considering [cannabis regulation](#). Bolivia, a country where the traditional use of the coca leaf is widespread, withdrew from the [1961 Single Convention on Narcotics Drugs](#) in 2012 to [re-accede](#) a year later with a national reservation that it does not accept the treaty's classification of the coca leaf as a narcotic drug. In the Netherlands it is good to remind ourselves that the very system of coffee shops is possible because of a similar national reservation under the [1988 Convention](#) against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances.

Finding common ground

At the international level, reform cannot come from the continuing ideological clash between left and right. It should be based on finding the common ground, where increased understanding of best practices and lessons learned, can produce incremental but solid steps towards more pragmatic and effective policies. The local and national levels will have to lead the way by showing what does and doesn't work, and what the impact of certain policies – positive or negative – really is for individuals, communities and societies at large.

There are a lot of challenges ahead in the run-up to 2019, when the next evaluation of international targets will take place at the level of the United Nations. Some of the key issues to be resolved are how to effectively integrate the world drug problem within the framework of the Sustainable Development Goals, how to make sure that the principle of [shared responsibility](#) at the international level leads to more funding and more effective cooperation, and how to assist countries with limited resources, such as Afghanistan, to address both the public health and law enforcement challenges related to the world drug problem.