



Global Youth Coalition Consultation

Compiled by Students for Sensible Drug Policy with collaboration from Canadian Students for Sensible Drug Policy, Students for Sensible Drug Policy UK, Youth Organisations for Drug Action, and YouthRIse

Recognizing our common goals of working towards evidence-based drug policies that reduce the harms of drug use and are grounded in human rights principles, including the right to health, the organizations listed above, working in informal coalition and representing thousands of youth in every region of the world, acknowledge the many impacts of drug use, drug markets, and drug control on our communities. Punitive drug policies have failed our generation and our society, impeding the development of young people and our full enjoyment of basic human rights. Governments typically justify their drug policies by invoking the need to protect young people. But we can speak for ourselves, and if policies are being implemented in our name, our voices must be heard.

Despite extensive efforts to reduce the consumption and supply of illicit substances, drug use and drug control policies continue to be major causes for concern, impacting the health and well-being of young people globally. While one of the main goals of drug policy has always been to protect the world's youth, the voices of young people have often been absent from the debate. We therefore welcome the UN's effort to provide a space for open debate around drug policy at the upcoming UNGASS, where SSDP and coalition partners are best suited to represent issues that directly affect youth populations.

We believe that harm reduction measures should be embraced by the UN, and even enshrined in the international drug control conventions, as a matter of urgency. The world's young people are often in close contact with drugs, and the past fifty years of the War on Drugs have done little to change that fact. Our work in direct contact with our peers has demonstrated that access to evidence-based education and health services without fear of punishment can create a *culture of safety* around drug use. Such a culture would best serve the goal SSDP and coalition partners advocate for and UN bodies including the WHO, UNAIDS, and UNICEF support: a drug policy based on evidence, compassion, health, and human rights.

Drawing from the extensive, on-the-ground experience of our organizations' hundreds of chapters and thousands of members, in addition to the data gathered in a consultation process we have carried out across the globe, we hereby encourage UN Member States to:

- Acknowledge and invest in harm reduction services such as drug checking kits, supervised injection facilities, educational material about minimizing risks associated with using drugs, and nightlife harm reduction; strongly encourage states to provide these services and to decriminalize the provision of these life-saving services.** Many organizations wish to provide these basic services, but are discouraged or disallowed from doing so because of the fear of criminal prosecution. A change is urgently needed, as harm reduction is well-documented as an evidence-based intervention that saves lives. For every \$1 USD invested in harm reduction, \$27 is saved on medical treatment,¹ making this approach more reasonable from an economic standpoint.
- Conduct an evaluation of international drug policies with regard to children and young people, seeking compliance with the stipulations of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, The World Health**

¹ LSE Ideas, (2014) 'Ending the Drug Wars' Report of the Expert Group
<https://www.lse.ac.uk/ideas/publications/reports/pdf/lse-ideas-drugs-report-final-web.pdf>

Organization, and other United Nations agencies and relevant treaties.² The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child provides the most appropriate framework from which considerations of impacts on young people should be drawn. Development of drug control strategies, outcomes, and evaluations must not seek to merely reduce drug use, but rather consider the breadth of impacts of youth drug use, involvement in drug trade, and exposure to supply- and demand-reduction efforts.

3. **Call for evidence-based, age-appropriate education that aims to provide objective information on drug use that prioritizes the reduction of harm rather than relying on fear and intimidation.** Preventative measures often based on 'just say no' rhetoric have done little to empower and educate youth to increase health and reduce drug harms, despite generously funded campaigns from Member States. Abstinence-only education is not a sufficient response to youth drug use, as it is important to recognize some youth will nonetheless choose to use drugs. Rather than solely providing information which discourages drug use, it would be far more effective to provide access to factual information that empowers young people, creates a culture of safety and responsibility, and recognizes the unique cultural and social climates experienced by young people.
4. **Call for the decriminalization of drug use and associated penalties for the possession of drugs.** Evidence shows that the harms of criminalizing people who use drugs far outweigh the effect of punitive legislation. This is particularly important for young people, students, homeless youth, and members of marginalized communities who suffer debilitating mental stress from incarceration and whose future employment and educational prospects are often severely jeopardized by criminal records. Furthermore, implementation of drug policy has disproportionately affected racial minorities. We see decriminalization as a first step to reversing these harmful effects of the War on Drugs.
5. **Allow and invest in research related to medical benefits of psychoactive substances such as cannabis, psilocybin, ayahuasca, ibogaine, and MDMA.** The international drug control regime has, as part of its mandate, the requirement of enabling access to controlled substances for medical and scientific uses. In practice, however, medical and scientific research of these substances has been severely limited due to regulatory and financial obstacles. These impediments have significantly slowed down research which would potentially uncover the beneficial uses of various controlled substances. Recent research has shown various substances scheduled as illicit could help with mental health issues such as depression or PTSD, and the rapid proliferation of medical cannabis underscores the need for a drug policy approach which prioritizes medical and scientific research and is grounded in evidence.
6. **Further encourage the UN to work to ensure active and meaningful participation of youth and youth-related organizations in the development, implementation and evaluation of drug policies and programs, in line with the UNGASS theme "A Better Tomorrow for the World's Youth."** We welcome the UN's initiative in appointing an "Affected Populations: Youth" representative as a member of the Civil Society Task Force. However, we are disappointed in the overall lack of opportunities presented for youth to engage in these discussions at the international level. Young people are too commonly excluded from discussions regarding their own future, and we believe there is room to further open the debate and include the youth voice. We invite all member states to include a youth member on any delegation to future sessions, meetings, and events regarding drug policy and request that side events focusing on youth are prioritized.

Noting that the present approach to drug control has failed to achieve objectives, we sincerely hope that the upcoming Special Session is, as expressed by Secretary-General Ban Ki Moon, a forum for "wide-ranging and open debate that considers all options." In order to forge an international drug policy approach which is effective in reducing drug-related harms and ensuring the health and well-being of young people worldwide, it is critical that international bodies and Member States consult and act on the input of youth. While the motto of UNGASS is "A Better Tomorrow for the World's Youth", we wish for a drug policy approach which seeks a better tomorrow *with* the world's youth.

² Damon Barrett, 2015 'A Better Tomorrow for the World's Youth? Accountability for children and young people at the 2016 UN General Assembly Special Session on Drugs' Open Society Foundations Discussion Paper
https://www.crin.org/sites/default/files/ungass_discussion_paper_final.pdf