
Police Statement of Support for Drug Policy Reform

Background and Rationale

(The statement itself follows this section)

Experience has shown that force alone cannot reduce the drug supply or the criminality and corruption that it induces. We need to regulate drugs because they are risky. Drugs are infinitely more dangerous when produced and sold by criminals who do not worry about any safety measures. Legal regulation protects health. Consumers need to be aware of what they are taking and have clear information on health risks and how to minimize them.

Kofi Annan (1938-2018), former UN Secretary General

Internationally over the past three decades there has been a growing movement for the reform of prohibition-based drug policies that have underpinned what is often referred to as 'the war on drugs'.

This reform movement has developed as the result of a recognition that the UN drug treaties, which aimed to eliminate the production and use of illicit substances for non-medical and non-scientific purposes, have gained very little ground. Many would argue further that not only have we consistently failed to achieve any significant beneficial outcomes from these policies, but that this approach has in fact been counter-productive to achieving "the health and welfare of mankind" (to quote the treaties themselves).

The calls for drug policy reform now come from a broad and wide-ranging group of actors that includes all relevant UN agencies, human rights treaties bodies and special commissions, current and former political leaders, former UN officials, members of the judiciary, scientists and academics, economists, drug policy experts, affected populations and their families, and now by those tasked with enforcing drug prohibition - the police.

Police are at the front-line of this "war", and many individuals around the world are growing weary of fighting a "war" that has so many negative outcomes, especially poor health outcomes, for so many of those involved. Police have growing concerns about a system that pits them against everyday citizens, creates opportunities for corruption, leads to violence, generates profits for criminals, increases risk of disease and undermines their public health mandate. Current drug policies also deny and undermine human rights yet at the same time fail to diminish the availability or demand for drugs.

The use of various substances to bring pleasure, to enhance or alter our mood, to help deal with physical and emotional pain, and/or to treat a range of health conditions is a constant throughout human history. Few societies, if any, have not indulged in substances of one kind or another. Yet we persist with policies and political rhetoric that ignores these facts.

Whilst it is acknowledged that there are risks associated with any use of illicit drugs, many police now also recognise that the majority of people that use illicit drugs do so with relatively little harm. So why do we continue to invest resources in a system that appears to be merely a net-widening exercises that catches and criminalizes people who use drugs? Additionally,

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most of the harms that people experience would be better addressed through a health-based response, rather than a punitive one.

Consequently, many police are questioning drug laws that are leading to mass arrests, the prosecuting of non-violent offenders, and burdening many people with criminal records and the risk of incarceration, and yet overall have little impact on the demand for, and availability of, drugs. Drug prohibition causes and exacerbates the stigma and discrimination that many people who use drugs experience, which was recognized in the resolution on stigma adopted by Member States at the 2018 Commission on Narcotic Drugs.

Furthermore, it is estimated that the global enforcement of drug prohibition costs about US\$ 100 billion every year. The majority of this money is spent on resourcing police, the courts and prisons for enforcing drug laws – and yet illicit drugs continue to be freely available in most communities.

We need to ask the question: what is successful drug law enforcement? Even when large amounts of illicit drugs are seized, the real-world impact on the market is infinitesimal.

These concerns are not only being voiced by many current and serving police throughout the world, but also by major UN agencies. The UNODC in 2008 identified five negative consequences of international drug policy:

- The creation of a huge criminal illegal market, along with all its attendant problems.
- “Policy displacement” through which scarce resources are redirected from health to law enforcement.
- “Geographical displacement” (the so-called ‘balloon’ effect) whereby drug markets restricted in one part of the world just shift to somewhere else.
- “Substance displacement” whereby people who use drugs turn to, often more harmful, alternatives due to drug law enforcement.
- The global stigma and discrimination of people who use drugs as criminals, which prevents them accessing treatment and support.

Many jurisdictions, such as Portugal, Uruguay, Canada and States within the USA, have started processes of drug law reform, especially the decriminalization of some or all drugs. These measures will result in significant savings to communities and the police, not just in terms of making people safer, but also a financial benefit that puts money back into schools, health, social and welfare programs.

The police should also put aside any thoughts that this movement is driven by political activists who want to undermine the police role and bring about civil unrest. It’s the exact opposite. There are people on both sides of politics, conservatives and liberals, who are calling for the current system to be overhauled and rebuilt. You are not being ‘soft on drugs’ when you call for reforms, you are courageously stepping onto the right side of history.

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The “war on drugs” approach creates a favourable climate for criminals and has many associated negative impacts. For example, the criminal drug trade:

- usually means high prices and profit margins, encouraging criminal involvement
- provides funds for associated criminal activity such as weapons dealing, people trafficking and increased political instability
- corrupts law enforcement and other government officials
- is violent and risks the safety of the broader community
- threatens public health and spreads disease and death
- impedes access to medicines
- undermines development and security, and fuels conflicts
- leads to criminal convictions which impact on employment, restrict travel and other opportunities
- results in trillions of dollars being poured into the criminal justice system to incarcerate millions of people world-wide
- promotes stigma, discrimination and the denial of basic human rights
- legitimizes criminal networks by providing funds to invest in mainstream businesses.

By contrast, eliminating this “war on drugs” approach would mean: less drug-related crime; less violence in the community; drastically reduced criminal profits and funds for other criminal activities; reduced prison populations and less pressure on criminal justice systems; less stigma and discrimination; and improved health outcomes for people who use drugs.

In a more humane drug policy response, people who use drugs would never be arrested or imprisoned for this simple act alone, saving the community billions of dollars. Any drug-related issues they do experience would be addressed through better-funded, more accessible health programs – as is the case in Portugal and elsewhere. And yet, as front-line service providers to people in need of help, the police would still be well situated to help facilitate access to these services through referral or diversion programs.

For this reason, we have developed the following statement to highlight the issues and demonstrate police support for the urgent reform of drug policies. Most importantly, this is also a call for action for police to be active participants in that reform process. If you want to do something about this issue, then please sign the Police Statement of Support for Drug Policy Reform. It is time for the police – the people that are forced into the front line of a “war on drugs” – to take a stand and speak out against this failed approach.

Police Statement of Support for Drug Policy Reform

The Statement:

We, the undersigned, agree that the current policy approach towards illicit drugs has not achieved the desired outcomes, and that new ways to manage this problem must be discussed, developed and adopted.

We, the undersigned, do not believe that drugs are illegal because they are inherently dangerous. Nor do we believe that there will ever be such a thing as a ‘drug free world’.

As police officers and other law enforcement personnel, we acknowledge that the use of drugs can be both risky and harmful. Daily we see the negative impacts and consequences of problematic drug use, just as we do alcohol misuse and other related problems.

People who use drugs are particularly vulnerable to a wide range of physical, social and emotional harms – including physical and mental illness, overdose, blood-borne viruses, accidents and injuries, unemployment, criminal records, incarceration, harassment, discrimination, and violence. Many are unable to gain access to health, social and welfare programs.

We believe that questions need to be asked about a drug control system that continues to pit police against some of the most vulnerable members of our society. The global drug treaties were never intended to be an exercise in capturing people who use drugs and commit no other crimes. Over decades, we have seen police, customs and border patrol agents seize hundreds of tons of illicit drugs, yet these seizures make little difference to the price or availability of illicit drugs around the world. For every drug dealer that’s arrested, two or more will take their place and, in many cases, violence increases.

We call for an immediate end to arbitrary detention, extra-judicial killings, the death penalty, torture and ill-treatment and other human rights abuses committed by some governments in the name of the “war on drugs”.

In the place of a “war on drugs”, we call for more humane drug policies that are developed with the local contexts in mind and after due consideration by the relevant authorities and affected populations. Such new policies would reduce risks, provide more humane responses, and lead to better health outcomes for the whole community – and they include:

1. **Harm Reduction:** policies and programmes that aim to reduce the harms associated with the use of drugs, especially for people unable or unwilling to stop. These include needle and syringe programmes, drug consumption rooms, outreach, drug checking and pill testing, and the prescribing of pharmaceutical substitutes for street drugs. These evidence-based programmes provide people who use drugs with health and social support, as well as a bridge into drug treatment, housing and employment.
2. **Decriminalisation:** the policy of removing criminal penalties for minor drug offences, such as the possession and use of illicit substances to reduce the harms

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experienced by those on the demand side. The offences remain prohibited, but are dealt with through administrative penalties or, ideally, through no sanctions at all.

- 3. Legal Regulation:** the process whereby drugs are no longer illegal. Instead, manufacture, production, sale, distribution and marketing is strictly regulated by the government and delivered by private or public enterprises rather than criminal groups. Regulated markets may take many different forms, dependent on the substance in question – from controlled sale, production and consumption such as for alcohol and tobacco, to more restrictive prescription-only models. Yet, across all models, the regulated and controlled availability of drugs will significantly shrink the existing illegal market thereby reducing corruption, economic costs and health harms associated with the current unregulated market.

We, the undersigned, call for urgent drug policy reform, and for the police to play a key role in ensuring reforms.

Signed: _____

Name: _____

Organisation: _____

Country: _____

Please send your signed form to: info@cleph.com.au