



**PANEL DISCUSSION ON
THE LEGALIZATION OF DRUGS: CAN IT HELP CURB ORGANIZED CRIME?**

25 March 2013 (9 a.m. – 12 noon)
San Francisco Convention Centre, Quito
Salón Landábuero, level -2

Concept note

The connection between drugs and organized crime has long been recognized as a problem that transcends national borders and demands global solutions. A number of mechanisms have been agreed at the United Nations over the years, aiming to curb drug use and combat organized crime. The main UN instruments in this area - the Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs (1961), the Convention on Psychotropic Substances (1971) and the Convention against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (1988) - have contributed to the establishment in many countries of legal systems based on drug prohibition at the levels of production, trafficking and consumption. Despite the massive deployment of police and other resources to enforce these legal frameworks, production and consumption of, and trafficking in, prohibited substances have increased exponentially over the past 30 years. Large-scale and deadly violence, as well as the corruption of the key pillars of democratic governance, have compounded this problem in entire regions.

In recent years there has been an emerging debate on the potential benefits and challenges of the legalization (or decriminalization) of drugs. Proponents argue that it would in fact reduce organized crime by depriving drug cartels of resources and freeing up law enforcement agencies to concentrate on other types of crime. Opponents, on the other hand, argue that the liberalization of drug laws will have no impact on criminal groups, which have proved to be able to diversify their criminal activity with astounding efficiency. This debate has found new impetus with the advent of diseases spread through drug-injection, such as HIV/AIDS, thus advancing the argument that the demand dimension cannot be neglected and that drug abuse should be treated as a public health issue rather than a criminal justice problem.

The panel discussion will address the successes and challenges of current drug policies in consumer, supplier and transit countries. It will reflect on the positioning of parliamentarians as critical leaders in creating legal frameworks that take full advantage of available evidence and scientific findings relevant to drug production and consumption. More specifically, the panel will aim to address the following questions:

- How does drug trafficking fuel organized crime, and what can be done about it?
- Have current drug laws achieved their aims of enhancing public health and curbing organized crime?
- What alternatives are there to drug prohibition, and are they viable? What risks are involved?
- What other policies and decisions should go hand-in-hand with the legalization or decriminalization of drugs so as to effectively address the host of problems associated with organized crime?
- How to balance public health concerns with opposition to the legalization of drugs?
- What is the role of parliamentarians, as legislators and opinion leaders?