



Inter-Parliamentary Union
For democracy. For everyone.

Chemin du Pommier 5
Case postale 330
1218 Le Grand-Saconnex
Geneva – Switzerland
www.ipu.org

IPU Statement

Mr. Saber Chowdhury
IPU President

Parliamentary Hearing at the United
Nations

8-9 February 2016

President Lykketoft,
Director Fedotov,
Excellencies,
Colleagues,

First of all let me thank our UN partners, particularly your office, Mr. President, for all of their support. Also, I appreciate very much the cooperation with UNODC.

We are gathered here for a very interesting and, hopefully, fruitful discussion.

There is no denying that drugs are a difficult issue. I know that there can be deep political divides when it comes to determining the appropriate response to this problem globally and within countries.

The IPU has had two resolutions on the drug issue in 1998 and 2010, and a good debate at the fall assembly in Geneva in 2014.

Already in the 1998 resolution, it was evident that the parliamentary community was contending with the way the world is dealing with this problem. Toward the end it recommends that *“countries study the effectiveness of current domestic laws, enforcement practices and legal penalties in reducing drug demand.”*

Since then, in many quarters, the debate has grown louder about the effectiveness of the so-called “war on drugs”. It is fair to say that the ground has shifted quite a bit in the last few years in terms of how people see these issues as well as in terms of the facts on the ground.

While the official purpose of UNGASS 16 is to review the implementation of official commitments under the conventions, there is a proverbial elephant in the room that one cannot avoid.

In truth, it is often difficult for policy makers to discuss things that many of them – though not all - have not experienced first-hand.

So let me play a little thought experiment and suggest that you think for a moment of that cup of coffee you probably had this morning to help you overcome jetlag and stay alert for this day ahead.

Caffeine is a most common psychoactive drug. It helps with concentration, and it is used in many pharmaceuticals together with other compounds. More to the point, caffeine can be *addictive*: if you skip your morning coffee one day you can tell something isn't quite right.

Of course, caffeine is nothing compared to drugs like cocaine, heroin, or cannabis, but I hope this far-fetched comparison can help us relate a little bit more personally to how millions of drug users feel.

It may help us enter this debate a little less judgmental and more compassionate toward drug users, or anyone with an addiction problem.

Deep down, everyone is vulnerable to addiction, whether it's from caffeine, alcohol, nicotine, or drugs. This isn't somebody else's problem. At least some of us know someone - family members, friends or colleagues affected by drugs. And certainly amongst our constituents, all of whom are entitled to your attention as citizens, there are concerns.

Clearly, there is a wide spectrum of drugs and many reasons why people make use of them. Just like there are many reasons why some people drink too much or can't quit smoking.

On this point, I know some people wonder why the legal framework for drugs is considerably more severe than for other substances such as alcohol and tobacco, whose effects are also harmful. While most drugs are *prohibited*, alcohol and cigarettes are simply *regulated*.

Worldwide, each year nearly 8 million people die from alcohol abuse and tobacco use combined. A much smaller number, under 300 thousands, die from drug use yearly.

What then explains our response to drugs over the years?

What is the *problem* with drugs?

What should be our response to drugs in light of new developments?

What do people really think about drug use today?

The first thing to know about the world drug problem is that it's not just *one* type of drug, and not just *one* problem. It's important that we distinguish carefully and not lump different things together.

For example, cannabis is very different from cocaine both in terms of the physical reaction and of the political economy of production and distribution. The drug problem in general is not the same in producing countries versus transit and consumption countries. And, new and dangerous chemical drugs have entered the scene.

Data shows the number of drug users remains steady despite an enormous investment in law enforcement. The costs of drug control have grown so high that more and more people wonder if some of these resources would not be better spent on other things. The medical uses of marijuana were not as well documented fifty years ago, when the drug conventions were written, as they are today.

Under pressure from their own publics, several governments are trying to come up with creative solutions that, some people worry, surpass the boundaries of the conventions too far.

The certain knowledge that some terrorists use the lucrative drug market to fuel their activities is a particular concern.

Another big change these past few decades is a growing awareness of human rights, and of the social, economic and even environmental implications of the global response to illicit drugs.

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) adopted only a few months ago right down the hall put *people* at the center of sustainable development. What do the SDGs portend when it comes to the drug problem and the way we will deal with it going forward?

To truly grasp this issue, we need to look at the facts as they are. We must be aware of the political under-currents and other interests involved, most of whom do not have the general welfare of the people in mind.

In the lead up to UNGASS, I hope this meeting will provide a strong indication of what is feasible politically, what needs to change and what should remain the same at the policy level.

The job of IPU as your parliamentary organization is to facilitate this debate. We are very pleased that we can partner with the UN in this endeavor.

We will listen carefully and make sure your views are heard.

Thank you.