

Why the High Level General Assembly Thematic Debate towards the 2016 UNGASS on drugs is important

On 7th May 2015, the UN General Assembly will hold a high-level thematic debate in support of the process towards the UN General Assembly Special Session on the World Drug Problem (UNGASS) scheduled for April 2016. The UNGASS is set to be a critical juncture for the international drug policy debate and will be an opportunity for an honest assessment of the successes and failures of global drug control policies. There is an urgent need for this debate, which is why in 2012, the Presidents of Colombia, Guatemala and Mexico called for the UNGASS to be held in 2016 (rather than 2019 as originally planned).¹ The UN Secretary General has urged member states to use the UNGASS to ‘to conduct a wide-ranging and open debate that considers all options’.²

The critical need for the UNGASS process to be broad and inclusive has also been reaffirmed by the General Assembly:

‘Reaffirms its decision, as recommended by the Commission on Narcotic Drugs, that the special session of the General Assembly on the world drug problem in 2016 shall have an inclusive preparatory process that includes extensive substantive consultations, allowing organs, entities and specialized agencies of the United Nations system, relevant international and regional organizations, civil society and other relevant stakeholders to fully contribute to the process in accordance with the relevant rules of procedure and established practice;’ (Resolution 69/201 para. 49, emphasis added).

The preparations for the UNGASS have already been underway for many months, led by the Commission on Narcotic Drugs (CND) based in Vienna with the most recent discussions taking place at a Special Segment on the UNGASS in March as part of the 58th Session of the CND.³

The high-level thematic debate on 7th May, as called for by General Assembly Resolution 69/201,⁴ will be the first time the UNGASS preparations will be substantively discussed in New York and therefore provides an important opportunity to engage both the broader UN family and New York-based country missions. While it is the mandate of the CND to ‘lead’⁵ on the UNGASS preparations, the fact that this debate will take place under the auspices of the General Assembly as a ‘special session’ provides a unique opportunity to give discussions on the future of international drug control the urgency and prominence that is required.

We strongly urge member states to ensure that they participate fully in the high-level thematic debate on 7th May in New York, particularly as:

- **The General Assembly is comprised of all 193 Members of the United Nations and ‘occupies a central position as the chief deliberative, policymaking and representative organ of the United Nations’.**⁶ The high-level thematic debate will allow for new perspectives, especially from those member states that do not have permanent representation in Vienna (around one-third of the 193 UN member

states do not), and have therefore been largely on the margins of the debates thus far. It is critical that, ahead of the UNGASS, all perspectives are heard and discussed.

- In terms of expert and technical inputs, **all relevant UN agencies must be encouraged to engage in the preparations** and the event on 7th May allows for the broader UN family to participate fully in a substantive debate ahead of the UNGASS moment itself. UN special sessions are rare and crucial moments in UN-level policy making and are designed to ensure a coherent UN system-wide response to global problems of major concern to the international community – this has so far been less than optimal in discussions on global drug policy. All relevant UN agencies should therefore have an active role in the session itself and throughout the preparatory process.
- The **importance of ensuring a balanced, open and inclusive debate** necessitates that discussions take place in multiple locations of strategic importance to the UN. As noted above, the preparatory process has so far been centred in Vienna, where the UN drug control structures are based, and there have been some concerns around ensuring openness and inclusiveness in the UNGASS debates if all the preparations are based in there. For example the primacy of human rights and the central role of public health within the UN drug policy debates have only been rather belatedly given prominence in the last few years. On the health front, the WHO and UNAIDS have mandates which are directly impacted by international drug control policies. Similarly, the impact of drug control on the development agenda makes it critical to involve New York-based agencies such as the United Nations Development Program (which recently made an excellent submission in support of the UNGASS debates⁷). Finally, with regards to human rights, the Human Rights Council recently adopted a landmark resolution entitled ‘Contribution of the Human Rights Council to UN General Assembly on the World Drug Problem of 2016’⁸ which was co-sponsored by 47⁹ countries from Europe, Latin America,

Asia, Africa and Oceania. The resolution convenes a panel of experts to discuss drug policies and their rights impact. It also requests that the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights produce a technical report on this issue to inform the UNGASS debates. So there is great value in opening the debate by including other key UN forums based in New York and Geneva.

- The **meaningful involvement of civil society** is outlined in CND Resolution 58/8, entitled ‘Special Session of the General Assembly on the World Drug Problem to be held in 2016’.¹⁰ The **Civil Society Task Force (CSTF)** has now been formally presented, and is supported by the President of the UNGASS Board and the Executive Director of UNODC as the key vehicle for civil society engagement in the UNGASS process. The CSTF will hold a civil society hearing on 6th May and will also play a primary role in the selection process for representatives to speak on behalf of civil society during the debate itself.

The draft concept note for the high-level thematic debate, circulated by the President of the General Assembly on 2nd April, provides a broad framework for the event and identifies some key questions that need to be addressed on the challenges, lessons learned and best practices in addressing the issue of drugs around the world. It is crucial for the continued international cooperation on drugs that member states are honest about ‘what works and what does not work’ when it comes to existing drug policies, and are committed to ensuring that the UNGASS (including its preparations) will be a meaningful process which contributes to ensuring that international drug control policies uphold the core principles of the UN – human rights, human security, public health and development.

The high-level thematic debate on 7th May in New York has been hard-fought-for by many member states seeking to ensure an open and inclusive UNGASS process. Given the unique and rare opportunity the event affords, it is vital that member states give the meeting the priority it deserves and participate at the highest level possible and request that their New York country missions are fully briefed ahead of the debate.

The International Drug Policy Consortium (IDPC) is a global network of more than 130 civil society organisations that come together to promote objective and open debates on national and international drug policies. The Consortium has agreed five main 'asks' that IDPC members will collectively call for between now and 2016:

- **ASK 1: Ensure an open and inclusive debate**
- **ASK 2: Re-set the objectives of drug policies**
- **ASK 3: Support policy experimentation and innovation**
- **ASK 4: End the criminalisation of the most affected populations**
- **ASK 5: Commit to the harm reduction approach to improving health and welfare of drug users**

For more detail on the IDPC UNGASS asks please see this link: <http://idpc.net/publications/2014/10/the-road-to-ungass-2016-process-and-policy-asks-from-idpc>

Endnotes:

1. <http://idpc.net/blog/2013/09/latin-american-leaders-bring-drug-policy-debate-to-the-un>
2. <http://www.un.org/sg/statements/index.asp?nid=6935>
3. http://www.unodc.org/documents/commissions/CND/CND_Sessions/CND_58/E2015_28_ADVANCE_UNEDITED_VERSION.pdf
4. http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/69/201&referer=/english/&Lang=E
5. As per resolution A/RES/69/201
6. <http://www.un.org/en/ga/about/background.shtml>
7. http://www.unodc.org/documents/ungass2016/Contributions/UN/UNDP/UNDP_paper_for_CND_March_2015.pdf
8. <http://www.cels.org.ar/Res%20Drugs%20Tabled%20Version.pdf>
9. Albania, Andorra, Argentina, Australia, Austria, Botswana, Brazil, Bulgaria, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Croatia, Cyprus, Denmark, Ecuador, Finland, France, Georgia, Greece, Guatemala, Haiti, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Israel, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Mexico, Moldavia, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Panama, Paraguay, Portugal, Romania, Rwanda, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Timor-Leste, Thailand, Turkey, Uruguay
10. http://www.unodc.org/documents/commissions/CND/CND_Sessions/CND_58/E2015_28_ADVANCE_UNEDITED_VERSION.pdf

About this advocacy note

The high-level thematic debate on 7th May, as called for by General Assembly Resolution 69/201, will be the first time the UNGASS preparations will be substantively discussed in New York and therefore provides an important opportunity to engage both the broader UN family and New York based country missions. While it is the mandate of the CND to 'lead' on the UNGASS preparations, the fact that this debate will take place under the auspices of the General Assembly as a 'special session' provides a unique opportunity to give discussions on the future of international drug control the urgency and prominence that is required.

International Drug Policy Consortium

Fifth Floor, 124-128 City Road
London EC1V 2NJ, United Kingdom

Tel: +44 (0)20 7324 2975
Email: contact@idpc.net
Website: www.idpc.net

About IDPC

The International Drug Policy Consortium is a global network of non-government organisations that specialise in issues related to illegal drug production and use. The Consortium aims to promote objective and open debate on the effectiveness, direction and content of drug policies at national and international level, and supports evidence-based policies that are effective in reducing drug-related harm. It produces briefing papers, disseminates the reports of its member organisations, and offers expert advice to policy makers and officials around the world.

© International Drug Policy Consortium Publication 2015

Report design by Mathew Birch - mathew@mathewbirch.com

Funded, in part, by:

