

MEDIA ADVISORY

Launch of “Drug Policy and Deprivation of Liberty”, the latest position paper by the Global Commission on Drug Policy, 13 June 2019

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(Stockholm, 13 June 2019)

The Global Commission on Drug Policy today releases *Drug Policy and Deprivation of Liberty*, a new position paper focusing on the “perfect storm” created by current drug policies, incarceration, prison overcrowding and inadequate health care for people who use drugs. Detention fuels the spread of infectious diseases, exacerbates problems of reintegration, and results in a loss of dignity for millions around the world. The paper is being presented on the margins of the Stockholm Criminology Symposium in Sweden.

Over the past 20 years, prison populations have increased by 122% in Southeast Asia and 175% in South America and in over half the countries in the world, prisons are overcrowded. Current drug laws have contributed to this situation significantly: out of the estimated ten million people incarcerated worldwide, one in five is incarcerated for a drug-related offense – and of these, more than eighty percent for drug possession alone.

“Prison is the most glaring expression of the failures of prohibition-based drug policies,” said Ruth Dreifuss, Chair of the Global Commission on Drug Policy, who received the 2019 Stockholm prize in Criminology on the 11th of June in recognition of the pioneer role Switzerland played, while she was the Minister in charge with public health, in introducing heroin-assisted treatment. “Despite decades of states punishing consumption, the demand for and supply of drugs has not been reduced. Over 60 years of the “war on drugs” have enriched and empowered transnational organized crime. Above all, incarceration is the epitome of the human cost of these failed policies. In our view, deprivation of liberty is the wrong response to drug use.”

Minimum standards for the treatment of people in detention and the protection of their human rights are not guaranteed and differences even within regions are vast. The funds expended per prisoner can serve as a proxy. In Central and Eastern Europe, Czechia spends over 16,000 Euros per prisoner per year while the Russian Federation spends as little as 912 Euros.

“Injecting drug use drives the HIV, hepatitis C and tuberculosis epidemic in Eastern Europe with rates often 10 or even 40 times higher in prisons than in the general population. In Ukraine for example, more than half of the incarcerated people inject drugs and needles are shared between 4 or more people,” stated Pavel Bém, psychiatrist, former Mayor of Prague and member of the Global Commission on Drug Policy. “Preventive measures and those reducing harms are well-known – sterile injection equipment, opioid substitution treatment, antiretroviral treatment – but very few countries provide them in prison - only eight worldwide in the case of needle and syringe programs.”

To remedy this situation causing avoidable suffering for millions, the Global Commission calls on States to end prison overcrowding and to ensure that all inmates, including people who use drugs, receive primary health care at the same level as the general population with special attention to harm reduction measures. All practices that violate human rights of people deprived of liberty must be forbidden. States should end disproportionate sentencing, including the removal of all penalties for drug possession for personal use.

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Quotes from Commissioners

“Studies show that the US has among the highest rates of drug use in the world. But even as restricting supply has failed to curb abuse, aggressive policing has led to thousands of young drug users filling American prisons, where they learn how to become real criminals.”

- **George P. Shultz**, former US Secretary of State, Honorary Chair of the Global Commission on Drug Policy, “The Failed War on Drugs”, *New York Times*, 31 December 2017.

“The widespread criminalization and punishment of people who use drugs, the over-crowded prisons, mean that the war on drugs is, to a significant degree, a war on drug users – a war on people”.

- **Kofi Annan**, former UN Secretary-General and member of the Global Commission on Drug Policy, “Wider den Bann”, *Der Spiegel*, 20 February 2016.

“There is a negative and mutually reinforcing impact of incarceration, drug use, tuberculosis, HIV and hepatitis. Overincarceration of people who use drugs creates a high-risk environment for diseases and their onwards transmission to the community after release.”

- **Michel Kazatchkine**, former Executive Director of the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, member of the Global Commission on Drug Policy

“A prohibitionist approach [to drug policy] is mandated by the UN conventions, which refer to drug addiction as an “evil”. It is a short step from that to seeing those who use drugs as evil and deserving of punishment.”

- **Helen Clark**, former Prime Minister of New Zealand and former Administrator of UNDP, member of the Global Commission on Drug Policy, Auckland, March 2019.

“In a number of countries, nearly half or more of the prison population comprise people who use drugs, for whom incarceration has no effect in reducing or altering drug use patterns. Such wasteful policies are a huge burden on the taxpayers.”

- **Anand Grover**, former UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Health, member of the Global Commission on Drug Policy

About the Global Commission on Drug Policy

[The Global Commission on Drug Policy](#) is an independent body comprising 26 members, including 14 former heads of state or government and four Nobel Prize laureates. Its purpose is to bring to the international level an informed, evidence-based discussion about humane and effective ways to reduce the harms caused by drugs and drug control policies to people and societies.

The Global Commission on Drug Policy has issued [eight reports](#) since its creation in 2011 and will launch a new report, “Classification of Psychoactive Substances: When Science was Left Behind” on 25 June 2019. The reports detail the extent of the failure and damage of five decades of prohibition and punitive measures, reveal the impact of repressive policies on health epidemics such as HIV/AIDS and hepatitis, the inequitable access to essential pain medication, biased perceptions surrounding drugs, the need to prioritize public health approaches, to decriminalize drug use and possession and to implement alternatives to punishment and proportionate sentencing, and ultimately the responsible legal regulation of psychoactive substances.

A ninth report entitled *Classification of Psychoactive Substances: When Science was Left Behind*, will be launched end June 2019 in Lisbon. It shows how the biased historical classification of psychoactive substances has contributed to the “world drug problem” and exposes in particular the commercial and cultural interests behind the prohibition of drugs.

The Commission has also previously published [two position papers](#), on the opioid-fueled overdose crisis in North America and on drug policy and the Sustainable Development Agenda.

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