MEDIA ADVISORY

Launch of a groundbreaking report presented by some 12 former heads of State and three Nobel peace prize laureates

CLASSIFICATION OF PSYCHOACTIVE SUBSTANCES
WHEN SCIENCE WAS LEFT BEHIND

Tuesday 25 June 2019
16h - 17h30 UTC/GMT (17h-18h30 local time)

City Hall, Room Archivos
Praça do Município
1100-038 Lisbon

This event will be livestreamed
(Lisbon, 25 June 2019) In the new report by the Global Commission on Drug Policy, *Classification of Psychoactive Substances: When Science was Left Behind*, former heads of state and other high-level dignitaries explain how the biased historical classification of psychoactive substances has contributed to the “world drug problem”. They expose in particular the commercial and cultural interests behind the prohibition of drugs.

This is the first comprehensive report providing a political reading of the current assessment, evaluation and classification or “scheduling” of drugs according to their potential harms. This classification constitutes the cornerstone of the UN Conventions establishing the international drug control regime and continues to be influenced by ideology and political gains, rather than informed by scientific research and review.

“The international system to classify drugs is at the core of the drug control regime—unfortunately that core is rotten,” says Ruth Dreifuss, former President of Switzerland and Chair of the Global Commission on Drug Policy. “Some drugs were evaluated up to eight decades ago - which does not represent current knowledge – and others have never been evaluated.”

Psychoactive substances should be classified with regard to their potential for dependence and other harms. This is not the case today, where some substances are legally available because they are considered beneficial (medicines) or culturally important (alcohol), while others are seen as destructive, and are strictly prohibited.

Their production, sale and consumption are been banned, with tragic consequences: people are executed for drug-related offenses, women receive a criminal record for carrying drugs and are separated from their children, individuals with dependency are forced into detention and treatment where they suffer physical and mental abuse, communities are torn apart as organized criminals engage in turf wars, farmers see their crops sprayed with harmful pesticides, and hundreds of thousands of people die every year from a drug-related overdose, are infected with HIV, or suffer crippling pain, unable to access the proper treatment, care or medication.

Jorge Sampaio, former president of Portugal and member of the Global Commission on Drug Policy, says: “This report provides new scientific insights on drugs. It challenges the international classification of drugs showing that it has little or no correlation to their scientifically-assessed harms. A non-stigmatizing and evidence-based drug scheduling system can make a real difference as it influences and guides people to make more responsible and less harmful choices. Using rational evidence for the assessment of the harms of drugs is, without any doubt, the way forward”.

The classification of drugs is at the core of the international drug control system. As such, governments must ensure that such a classification is pragmatic and based on science and evidence, makes clear the benefits and harms of drugs, and allows for responsible legal regulatory models to control drugs.

[ENDS]
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For more information or to arrange an interview, please contact:

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Members of the Global Commission presenting the new report

Louise Arbour, former High Commissioner for Human Rights (Canada)
Pavel Bém, former Mayor of Prague (Czechia)
Fernando Henrique Cardoso, former President of Brazil
Maria Cattau, former Secretary General of the International Chamber of Commerce (Switzerland)
Helen Clark, former Prime Minister of New Zealand, and former Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme
Ruth Dreifuss, former President of Switzerland and Chair of the Global Commission on Drug Policy
Mohamed ElBaradei, Director General Emeritus of the International Atomic Energy Agency, Nobel Peace Prize laureate (Egypt)
Anand Grover, former UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Health (India)
Michel Kazatchkine, former Executive Director of the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria (France)
Ricardo Lagos, former President of Chile
Kgalema Motlanthe, former President of South Africa
Olusegun Obasanjo, former President of Nigeria, Chair of the West Africa Commission on Drugs
José Ramos-Horta, former President of Timor-Leste, Nobel Peace Prize laureate
Jorge Sampaio, former President of Portugal
Juan Manuel Santos, former President of Colombia, Nobel Peace Prize laureate
Ernesto Zedillo, former President of Mexico

Other quotes by members of the Global Commission on Drug Policy

“Until 1961, the decision on classifying psychoactive substances was in the hands of specialized health agencies acting on the advice of an expert committee. Now, however, experts only provide recommendations, which are then voted on by the Commission on Narcotic Drugs, a body comprising representatives of UN member states. This has opened to political considerations what should be a scientific determination.”

- Louise Arbour, former High Commissioner for Human Rights
“The European colonial powers resisted the imposition of stricter prohibition because they had profitable monopolies in the trade of opium, coca and cannabis in their overseas territories. It was only when they “lost” their colonies and that trade that a global regime focused on prohibition was established under U.S. pressure. Traditional uses of opium and coca were no longer profitable to the Western World and therefore forbidden – often disregarding centuries-old practices and the cultures behind them, and criminalizing the behavior of millions of citizens.”

- Fernando Henrique Cardoso, former President of Brazil

“Cannabis had been placed in the category of the most dangerous drugs with no medical value - supposedly based on an evaluation from the 1930s, which by now has even disappeared from the archives. Despite the fact that many countries are now allowing cannabis for medical use, we had to wait until 2018 for the WHO expert group to undertake a review of the substance. Their recommendation acknowledged the medical benefit of cannabis but also once again showed the limitations of the current system. While it clearly states that cannabis is ‘not associated with the same level of risk to health’ as the other drugs in its category, it recommends leaving it in that schedule because it is widely and globally used. This looks very much like the old argument which considers drug use to be bad, not because of its potential health harms but because it is supposedly immoral.”

- Helen Clark, former Prime Minister of New Zealand and former Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme

“The first drug control treaties – and what they cover – reflect the cultural biases of the powers at the negotiating table. People are willing to accept forms of intoxication they are familiar with but not others. Alcohol and tobacco were the socially accepted drugs in the home countries of the main negotiators, so were never seriously considered as drugs to be put under international control. There are severe problems with these legal substances, for example half of all smokers will die as a result of their habit. But the problems would be worse if they were illegal as well. Under Prohibition in the US, we saw a lot of the same problems with alcohol as we do now with currently illegal drugs, e.g. people drank more liquor and less beer, home-distilled alcohol caused ethanol poisoning etc. We need a public health approach for all problematic use of psychoactive substances.”

- Mohamed ElBaradei, Director Emeritus of the International Atomic Energy Agency

“The drug control system is built on feet of clay. The structural inconsistencies start with the supposed distinction between “narcotic drugs” governed by one treaty and “psychotropic substances” which allowed for more lenient control of drugs produced by pharmaceutical firms rather than peasant farmers. It has no conceptual basis. The legal definition of many psychotropic substances is entirely applicable to narcotic drugs, and in many cases, the reverse is true. Whether a drug is legal or illegal has more to do with history and geography than with its pharmacological qualities or the harms it may cause.”

- José Ramos-Horta, former President of Timor-Leste

“The only responsible answer is to regulate the market of illegal drugs based on a new scheduling system that takes into account the risks of each drug through solid scientific
assessments. The use of rational evidence for the assessment of the harms of drugs will be one step forward to the development of a credible drugs strategy.”
- Juan Manuel Santos, former President of Colombia

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. These respectively 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, decriminalization of drug use and proportional sentencing and, ultimately, the responsible legal regulation of psychoactive substances.

The Commission has also 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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