

## PRESS RELEASE

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THE GLOBAL COMMISSION ON DRUG POLICY LAUNCHES A  
POSITION PAPER ON THE OPIOID CRISIS IN NORTH AMERICA



## THE OPIOID CRISIS IN NORTH AMERICA

**Monday, 2 October, 2017 (Geneva, Switzerland)** The Global Commission on Drug Policy today released a position paper on *The Opioid Crisis in North America*. With some 64,000 drug overdose deaths in 2016 in the US alone, the extent of the opioid-driven public health crisis cannot be overstated. The members of the Global Commission on Drug Policy, several of whom faced similar crises while occupying the highest levels of government in their own countries, share their views and recommendations on how to mitigate this epidemic.

Aware of the large body of work on the opioid crisis, the position paper offers an analysis and conclusions from the outside which can add to the national debates, which the United States and Canada must have. The Commission warns against cutting the supply of prescription opioids without first putting supporting measures in place and emphasizes the need to improve and expand proven harm reduction services and treatment options, including opioid substitution therapy and heroin-assisted treatment. Regulation of prescription opioids needs to become well-balanced to provide effective pain care while minimizing misuse.

The Global Commission also calls for the de facto decriminalization of drug use and possession for personal use at the municipality, city or State/Province levels. Such offenses should not be pursued, so that people in need of health and social services can access them freely, easily, and without fear of punishment. Finally, the Global Commission suggests allowing and promoting pilot projects for the responsible legal regulation of currently illicit drugs including opioids, to replace and bypass criminal organizations that drive and benefit from the current black market.

The Global Commission has called for the legal regulation of psychoactive substances since 2011, and sees in the opioid crisis a failure of regulation for medical purposes alone. The opioid crisis, characterized by a transition from licit prescription opioids via their illicit use to illicit heroin, also demonstrates the narrow and arbitrary boundaries that exist between licit and illicit substances.

Ruth Dreifuss, former President of Switzerland and Chair of the Global Commission on Drug Policy, said: “In 2017, Switzerland celebrated 25 years of heroin-assisted treatment and harm reduction policies. Drug-related deaths dropped by 50% within the first decade of implementation. There was also an 82% decrease in patients who used to sell heroin on the black market.”

Jorge Sampaio, former President of Portugal and member of the Global Commission on Drug Policy said, “In the 1990s, Portugal was experiencing heroin and HIV epidemics with open drug scenes and soaring overdose rates. We responded by changing the approach to drug addiction focusing on it first and foremost as a public health issue. This shift allowed people who use drugs to access services without fear of legal coercion. Today, Portugal has one of the lowest rates of drug overdose deaths in Europe.”

“Safe injection facilities have proven to be highly effective in preventing and reducing the harms related to drug use, when combined with other evidence-based services such as needle and syringe programs and psychosocial interventions” said Michel Kazatchkine, former Executive Director of the Global Fund to fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, and member of the Global Commission. “The United States should consider their immediate implementation, as Canada is now doing, to ease the burden of the opioid crisis on people who use drugs and the general population.”

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**ENDS**

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The Global Commission on Drug Policy was established in 2011 by political leaders, cultural figures, and globally influential personalities from the financial and business sectors. The Commission currently comprises twenty-three members, including ten former Heads of States or Government and a former Secretary General of the United Nations. Our mission is to promote evidence-based drug policy reforms at international, national and regional levels. These reforms must also address issues of public health, social integration and security, with strict regard for human rights.

The Global Commission on Drug Policy has issued six yearly reports, beginning in 2011 with [\*War on Drugs\*](#), which details the extent of the failure and damage of five decades of prohibition and punitive measures. In 2014, [\*Taking Control: Pathways to Drug Policies that Work\*](#) emphasized public health approaches, alternatives to incarceration, and decriminalization, as well as calling for the legal regulation of psychoactive substances.

The three other reports by the Global Commission on Drug Policy are more technical in nature and highlight how prohibitive drug control negatively impacts public health issues: HIV/AIDS ([\*How the Criminalization of Drug Use Fuels the Global Pandemic\*](#), 2012), Hepatitis C ([\*The Hidden Hepatitis C Epidemic\*](#), 2013) and how the current international drug control system creates barriers for access to essential medicines for pain and palliative care in countries around the world where they are desperately needed ([\*The Global Crisis of Avoidable Pain\*](#), 2015).

The Global Commission's most recent report ([\*Advancing Drug Policy Reform: a new approach to decriminalization\*](#)) examines in more depth this particular recommendation in addressing the issue of drugs in society and calls for an end to all civil and criminal penalties for drug consumption and possession for personal use.

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