

61st Commission on Narcotic Drugs, 3rd Intersessional Meeting Thematic Discussion on Cross-cutting issues: drugs, and human rights, youth, children, women and communities; Statement by Orsolya Feher, Students from Sensible Drug Policy (SSDP), September 27, 2018.

Let me begin by thanking the UNODC, the Commission and the Civil Society Task Force for this opportunity to speak to you on this urgent issue today. I believe I was selected because my organization is the only international non-profit advocacy and education organization that mobilizes and empowers young people to participate in the political process to achieve a safer and more just future. We base our activities, and this speech today, on our experiences being embedded in communities that include children, teenagers and young adults who are exposed to drugs, drug abuse and are directly affected by the decisions that are made in this building about drug policies.

My name is Orsi, I am a Fellow at SSDP and as a politically active young person, I have been in these rooms, in high level policy-making meetings for the last two years and I have heard a lot of talk about protecting young people and overcoming stigma, especially when it comes to vulnerable members of society. This made me really confused because at the same time, a very excluding and stigmatizing language is enshrined in the conventions that are regarded as the “cornerstones of the international drug control regime”. However prohibited they are, the reality is that drugs are not absent from our societies – hence the existence of this intuition; and they are definitely not absent from the lives of young people - hence the existence of SSDP. We are the youth who drug policies affect, with chapters on every continent and international allies, we have accumulated precious knowledge about the people you wish to build a better future for and we are happy to share with you.

It is a general rule in commerce, that the less available something is, the more valuable it is, and for young people, the more exciting it is to be in the possession of this thing. So, prohibition doesn't work and hasn't worked for young people for 60 years. It is because we are cynical, we are cavalier and we are curious. But you want us and you want children to be curious and to explore. You want them to want to learn and be open to new things because every kid should have the right to experience life for themselves and to make mistakes in their pursuit for knowledge.

So, when it comes to the sensitive, and often risky, topic of drugs, we are all on the same page – we don't want children and young people to make grave mistakes. That is why I am here to encourage you to direct efforts towards equipping young people with the knowledge, the skills and the sensitivity to avoid making risky moves about drugs. But also want to remind you of 4f of the 2016 UNGASS outcome document that stresses the importance of recognizing the specific needs of children and young people. We have found it extremely difficult to convey to the United Nations and its member states the specific needs that we've uncovered in the past 20 years of our work, so let me tell you what we are and have been doing to implement age-appropriate practical measures tailored to these specific needs in the cultural and educational sectors to complement the available services that national agencies provide. We organize community events and educational activities, where the audience is empowered to use their brains, such as documentary screenings, discussions with researchers on the latest findings about the various effects of substances, state of the art understandings of addiction and addiction treatment - we are creating a learning environment that makes us feel empowered to think for ourselves, to ask uncomfortable questions, to decide what is best for us. So, we are motivated to be competent, knowledgeable about the harms and possible benefits of consuming certain drugs – be it legal, illegal or pharmaceutical.

We have also developed a Just Say Know peer-education program. The significance of this project is that it was put together by mental health professionals, doctors, addictologists, researchers, professors TOGETHER WITH students. So the curriculum combines knowledge and experience based on science, professional experience and the actual experience of the people that it is aimed at. Instead of teaching that the only acceptable strategy to respond to drugs is saying no, we are meeting young people where they are, in their understanding of the world, and we value their authentic experiences to build rapport. This trust is the building block of effective education and a true early warning system. From this place of trust, we can open a conversation to uncover what specific challenges these young individuals face, what could be the actual strategy for them to stay safe and healthy and how we can support them in making the right moves, as a community. This is what 4f in the outcome document is projecting, isn't it?

We will not be able to build this trust if we behave as we know better than them, if we keep information from them, if we assume things about them and we will not be able to build trust if we think that drug education begins and ends in the classroom with doctrines, with one adult positioning themselves above „the children” who consume information, facts about the dangers of some mysterious forbidden molecule. If we keep using stigmatizing language and label those who make choices that we don't agree with, if we preach sobriety as the one and only way of staying safe, we will be excluding those who need our help the most and we will not adhere to the UNODC's principle of “leaving no one behind”.

I think this should apply to policy making as well... If we are aiming to protect a certain group of people, before assuming what's best for them, let's ask them. Let's talk to them about their daily struggles and successes, let's engage them in creating the systems that they will maneuver their lives within. THIS is what will keep us, the youth, safe, healthy and aware: opportunities for non-judgmental conversation, where we, individuals, are in focus and not some outdated ideology. I am grateful for this opportunity to be here today and to be listened to by you, to be able to put the experience of my peers in focus. However, I am only one of the thousand members my organization, SSDP, has all over the Globe and SSDP is only one of the many organizations who are in every day contact with young people who are exposed to drugs and drug abuse. We have actually formed an informal coalition of organizations that are led by young people: the Paradigma coalition represent thousands of young people in every region of the world. So if the distinguished member states and all the institutions that are empowered by the conventions to make the rules - WHO, INCB and CND, if you all really want to align yourself to your promise in 2016, creating a “A Better Tomorrow for the World's Youth” you should provide meaningful ways for us to share more often. We are not only easy to find, we are eager to help you help us.