

INTERSESSIONAL MEETING 26-28 SEPTEMBER 2017

Panel on Chapter 1: “Operational recommendations on demand reduction and related measures, including prevention and treatment, as well as other health-related issues”

Vienna, 26 September 2017

Thank you Mr. Ambassador

Distinguished Delegates, Dear panellists, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Chair, I would like to thank you for organizing this panel in which Portugal can share its approach in the field of demand reduction.

Allow me to start by saying that, for us, one of the key achievements of the UNGASS 2016 was the recognition of the need to rebalance drug policies towards a more human rights and public health based approach.

The Portuguese policy on drugs is based on the assumption that drug use is a health issue and drug dependence is a chronic and treatable multi-factorial health disorder, which needs to be treated, not punished. We follow a comprehensive approach designed to deter drug use and to promote measures addressing public health concerns, with social benefits to all involved. Our policy prioritize prevention and reduction of drug use among the population and the reduction of health and social consequences related to drug use, contributing to the attainment of a high level of health protection, well-being and social cohesion.

In Portugal, evidence-based knowledge acquired over the last decades allowed us to consolidate our policy, with the implementation of integrated responses on prevention, treatment, risk and harm reduction and social reintegration, within a decriminalisation framework of personal consumption and possession of drugs, below defined quantities. The idea is to reinforce the resources in the context of demand reduction by referring drug addicts to treatment and pointing out those that are not addicted but need a specialized intervention.

Along with the decriminalisation law, that entered into force in 2001, a full range of responses was developed in the areas of treatment and of risk and harm reduction in a perspective of promoting public health, focusing the intervention on the consequences that arise from the addictive behavior. So, the idea behind is that give up from people is not an option, even when they are not able to stop consumption.

Reducing drug use and its consequences by improving the coverage, quality and effectiveness of demand reduction interventions are, therefore, the pragmatic aims of the drugs policy that Portugal has been implementing over the past 16 years, with particular attention to vulnerable groups, including young people and high risk groups, and the prevention of polydrug use.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Indeed, the availability of diverse options of treatment, along with the implementation of harm reduction and social reintegration measures is considered to be a key factor of our policy, as they protect, not only drug users, but society as a whole, improving the health and wellbeing of drug users and their families.

Harm reduction measures should help, not only to prevent the risk of propagation of infectious and contagious diseases, but also prevent social marginalization and delinquency, as well as to help to create an environment in which drug addicts are motivated to attend treatment programs.

A network of harm reduction programmes and structures, including needle and syringe exchange programmes, opioid low-threshold substitution programmes, testing blood born infectious diseases associated with drug use, peer-based interventions and outreach teams, has been consolidated throughout the country in critical zones, with the aim of preventing drug-related risks, such as infectious diseases, social exclusion and delinquency.

We welcome the reference made to some of these crucial measures in the UNGASS outcome document and encourage other Member States to consider these recommendations as priority in the demand reduction field.

Chair, scientific evidence clearly shows that there are remarkable benefits to be gained from implementing policies to reduce the harm caused by drug consumption and to socially reintegrate drug dependent individuals.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Currently, drug use level in Portugal stills remains generally below the European average and we register a decrease in drug use among adolescents, since 2003. Over the past decade and a half, this policy contributed also to a significant reduction in the number of problematic users; an important decline in infections by HIV among injecting drug users and a substantial growth of cannabis users in treatment facilities.

I would like to underscore the expectations for an open debate on how to advance implementation of the operational recommendations of the UNGASS Outcome Document, which we consider as a pivotal reference document for discussions of relevance to international drug policy.

To conclude, I reaffirm Portugal's commitment to further guide or assist the implementation of the operational recommendations of the UNGASS Outcome Document, in order to promote a greater balance in the international approach by strengthening action on the public health dimension of the world drug problem.

Thank you for your attention.