

ADDRESS BY DR. CARLOS MEDINA, VICE MINISTER OF CRIMINAL POLICY AND RESTORATIVE JUSTICE, ON THE OCCASION OF SIDE-EVENT "UNGASS 2016 ON THE DRUG PROBLEM: FOCUS ON PEOPLE, PUBLIC HEALTH AND HUMAN RIGHTS" VIENNA, AUSTRIA - DECEMBER 9

Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen Ministers and Heads of Delegation,  
Honorable Members of the Bureau, representatives of the governments of Switzerland and Norway  
Representatives of United Nations Agencies  
Members of the Civil Society Organizations  
Ladies and Gentlemen

On behalf of the Government of Colombia I would like to thank you for the opportunity to address you as part of such an important side event co-sponsored by the governments of Switzerland, Norway and Colombia, which puts on the agenda two central issues for the international regime of drug control: public health and human rights. In 1961 countries set as the ultimate goal of the Conventions on Drugs "to preserve the health and welfare of mankind." Half a century later, we can say that despite the good intentions that were at the basis of our commitments, the results make it clear that we are still very far from meeting our goals.

What the evidence shows is that the common goal of "a world free of drugs" is frankly unattainable. We have made enormous efforts and sacrifices to suppress the market for illegal drugs; however, today we only have modest advances that are overshadowed by persistent problems that affect the lives of millions of people. The global production and consumption of drugs has not changed overall, while facing major difficulties in ensuring the provision of basic goods and services for citizens.

The application of death penalty or the imposition of life sentences for drug-related crimes are unacceptable in Colombia. . We should ask ourselves, what is the incidence of such measures on people's health and welfare? The drug control regime is inseparable from the way some countries have decided to apply it. The conventions meaning is materialized on a daily basis through measures implemented by the member states for its achievement.

For Colombia, a closer look on drug users is necessary but insufficient. We can not continue talking about the problems we face without including in the discussion other components of the chain, which are also vulnerable: farmers who are close to the poverty line, human couriers with drugs to meet a high demand, farmers and rural poor individuals under pressure of organized crime and traffic organizations. Hundreds of people are not visible, and the predominant response by the states has been the use of criminal law.

We have to be clear: the costs and negative impacts of the implementation of the international regime have been distributed unevenly over the world. While in developed countries they have progressively taken steps to recognize the rights and freedoms of drug users, yet the silence prevails on vulnerable populations in the producing and transit countries. To respond to these realities, the approach focusing on the repression of supply and demand reduction falls short, if it is not implemented with an inclusive and comprehensive involvement of the local governments. Understanding this issue is a ground of common and shared responsibility.

This does not mean denying that we must continue responding with firmness and determination against organized crime, focusing our resources and capabilities to repress the strongest links. We must understand that the punitive measures need to go hand in hand with interventions that allow changing the conditions in which these communities live. Health, development and the guarantee of human rights cannot continue to occupy a second place.

The Government of Colombia understood this reality and made relevant decisions as the suspension of aerial aspersions because of its negative effects on health and environment, as well as a Comprehensive Strategy for Illicit Crop Substitution, which brings forward transformation and development for the territories and populations affected by illicit crops.

At the same time, we have created a comprehensive care plan for drug use and its consequences and an inter-sectoral commission to deal with its implementation and monitoring. The aim is to strengthen the public health approach throughout drug policy, providing solutions to the determinants of this problem, not their terminal expressions.

We require to advance firmly and decisively in a new global consensus, rather than a war, which leads us to the adoption of smart measures, focusing on those that allow better results. The Sustainable Development Goals adopted recently by the States at the United Nations, force us to put our efforts into concrete goals that contribute to progress in terms of health, gender equality, reduction of inequalities and access to justice. Additionally, in Colombia, we have made a very firm commitment to the ultimate goal of peace, which depends largely on an integral response to drug trafficking.

We welcome in a positive manner the fact that other voices are joining this new approaches and supporting these efforts and we hope that CND and the Board in charge of preparing the special sessions will take their contributions into account. The international drug regime can be no longer disconnected from the prevailing obligation of Human Rights and the role that UN agencies like UNAIDS, WHO and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights should have in this process. The voice of civil society must also be closely taken into account in this process.

We have before us an historic opportunity to humanize drug policy. An invitation is open to build a different future, in which people are more important than substances and the intentions are reinforced with actions to ensure individuals' health and well-being. We must not lose the way in a discussion on how to interpret the conventions but we must do everything possible to ensure that drug policies are closely linked to its obligations in terms of human rights and sustainable development. This is the main challenge.

Thank you very much.