Statement of the
Portuguese Secretary of State Assistant and of Health,
Prof. Fernando Araújo,
at the 59th Session of the Commission on Narcotic Drugs
Vienna, 14th March 2016

Thank you, Mr. Chairman,

Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen,

First, I would like to congratulate you, Ambassador, as Chair of the 59th Session of the Commission on Narcotic Drugs. We have many important issues to consider over the coming days and I would like to assure you of the full cooperation of my delegation in successfully carrying out our work. I would also like to stress, at this point, that Portugal associates itself with the statement made by the European Union.

Allow me also to express my appreciation for the UNGASS Board efforts and for their hard work in the last months, on the UNGASSS outcome document, which we hope will become the consensus document coming out of UNGASS 2016 and the basis of a new approach towards addressing the global drug problem.

Mr. Chairman, the upcoming UNGASS 2016 is an important and unique opportunity for all Member States, civil society and international organizations to properly assess the international strategy to tackle the
world drug problem. It offers an opportunity to learn from policies of the past, raise awareness of the challenges that exist at global, national and local level, and provide a solid input towards the target date of 2019 and beyond.

The European Union and its Member States have been very much engaged in the UNGASS preparatory process, providing contributions and defining its common position, with which Portugal aligns itself fully.

Portugal has identified several principles, concerns and priorities that should be reflected in the UNGASS outcome. I would like to highlight some of those elements.

First of all, the need to balance drug policies towards a human rights and public health based approach. UNGASS 2016 should be a turning point on this issue, which has been widely recognised: Drug use is a public health issue. The Portuguese approach on drugs has been considered a model of best practices, due to the fact that we recognize drug use as a health issue and drug dependence as a chronic and treatable multi-factorial health disorder, which need to be treated and not punished.

Portugal also firmly believes that our efforts in addressing the world drug problem must incorporate a human rights perspective. I would like to underline our country’s firm opposition to the death penalty in all circumstances, including for drug-related offences. We therefore call on all countries that retain the capital punishment to establish an immediate official moratorium, with a view to its permanent abolition.
Other key principle for which we stand for is the commitment to a risk and harm reduction approach, which should be clearly outlined in the outcome document.

Indeed, in Portugal, decriminalisation created a legal framework for implementing policies to reduce the harm caused by drug consumption and to socially reintegrate drug dependent persons. Decriminalisation is, therefore, a part of a comprehensive approach that includes prevention, treatment, harm reduction and reintegration. The implementation of harm reduction measures is a key factor of our policy, as they protect not only drug users but society as a whole, improving the health and well-being of drug users and their families.

Mr. Chairman, as a contribution to the preparations for UNGASS 2016, Portugal has been sharing its approach, emphasizing the benefits to be gained from implementing policies to reduce the harm caused by drug consumption and to socially reintegrate drug dependent individuals.

As we get closer to the date of the 2016 United Nations General Assembly’s Special Session on the world drug problem, we should endeavour towards an evidence based approach to guide our discussions and take it into account whenever formulating future policies.

In this regard, it is essential that policies, current or new ones, be implemented in full respect of the UN Conventions which provide the international legal framework for addressing the drugs problem and the
Universal Declaration on Human Rights. These are the cornerstones of the global response to the world drug problem.

We firmly believe that, in the framework of those international treaties we have flexibility to gradually build more humane policies, based on solid scientific evidence and on the respect for human rights.

We would like to take this opportunity to reiterate the importance of the engagement of civil society and scientific community in the development, implementation and evaluation of drug demand reduction policies, both at the national and the international levels. Civil society has been playing an active role in the elaboration and implementation of our own policy and we would like to stress the great importance of an increased participation of these actors, an element which the outcome document should recognise.

In conclusion, allow me to pledge our unwavering commitment to a successful outcome of the UNGASS process and of this session.

Thank you for your attention.