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**Commission on Narcotic Drugs**  
**Sixty-second session**  
Vienna, 14–22 March 2019  
Item 4 of the provisional agenda\*  
**General debate of the ministerial segment**

**Conference room paper submitted by Switzerland on the  
views of civil society for drug policies beyond 2019\*\***

*Disclaimer: This report summarizes the outcomes of activities conducted by an independent Civil Society Task Force on drugs (CSTF), but does not necessarily reflect the positions of the Swiss Government.*

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\* [E/CN.7/2019/1](#).

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## I. Introduction

In March 2018, the Vienna NGO Committee on drugs (VNGOC) and the New York NGO Committee on drugs (NYNGOC) partnered to relaunch a **Civil Society Task Force (CSTF)** for the ministerial segment of the 62nd session of the Commission on Narcotic Drugs.<sup>1</sup>

Building on the successful experiences in NGO coordination for the Beyond 2008 initiative<sup>2</sup> and the 2016 United Nations General Assembly Special Session (UNGASS) on the “world drug problem”,<sup>3</sup> the goal of the Task Force is to secure the comprehensive, structured, meaningful and balanced participation of civil society in the ministerial segment and its preparations. As such, the Task Force has served as the official liaison between the United Nations and civil society throughout the past twelve months.

The CSTF is co-chaired by the Vienna and New York Committees, and comprises 35 members: a seven-person Steering Group, 18 regional representatives (two from each region of the world), and ten representatives from affected populations and key global issues. All members were selected following open calls for nominations.

This paper summarises the outcomes from three of the main activities conducted by the Task Force in 2018–2019: a global online consultation of civil society organizations, a Civil Society Hearing held in New York on 20th February 2019, and a Civil Society Hearing held in Vienna on 26th February 2019.

## II. The Global Civil Society Consultation

In October and November 2018, the Task Force conducted an online consultation for civil society which was translated into the six official languages of the United Nations. Building on the consultations conducted by the Task Force for 2016, the questions covered three key areas: progress since the adoption of *the 2009 Political Declaration and Plan of Action on International Cooperation towards an Integrated and Balanced Strategy to Counter the World Drug Problem*; progress since the 2016 UNGASS on drugs; and views on the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

In total, complete and eligible responses were received from 461 non-governmental organizations (NGOs) from 100 countries and territories. Nearly 40 per cent of the respondents were NGOs that deliver services directly, whereas a further third were advocacy organizations. More than two thirds of respondents were from the local or national level. Respondents also came from a variety of fields – such as prevention (25 per cent), harm reduction (19 per cent), human rights (10 per cent), drug law reform (9 per cent), treatment (8 per cent) and rehabilitation (5 per cent). A quarter of the respondents were from Western Europe, 22 per cent from Latin America and the Caribbean, 14 per cent from Africa, 12 per cent from North America, with the remainder from Asia, Eurasia, the Middle East and Oceania.

The consultation results demonstrated that a wide variety of views exist, with responses clearly divided on a number of questions. Among the key findings were:

- When asked about the value of the existing commitment towards a “world free of drug abuse”, half of the respondents indicated that they *did not* support this language, while 42 per cent believed that international efforts could be adequately implemented, tracked and advanced in this way.
- Across all five of the goals outlined in operative paragraph 36 of the 2009 Political Declaration, most respondents felt that there had been regression, rather than progress made, over the past ten years.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.cstfondrugs.org/>.

<sup>2</sup> <http://vngoc.org/beyond-2008/beyond-2008-forum/>.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.cstfondrugs.org/cstf-for-ungass-2016/activities/>.

- However, the largest number of respondents also supported the extension of these goals beyond 2019 – with variations also notable between responses in different regions, and for different goals. For example, while 41 per cent of the respondents *disagreed* with extending the first goal related to the illicit cultivation of drugs, 74 per cent *agreed* with extending the fifth goal on money-laundering related to illicit drugs.
- The clear majority (75 per cent) of NGO respondents felt that their work advanced or supported efforts towards one or more of these goals.
- Two-thirds of the NGO respondents were aware of the UNGASS Outcome Document from 2016, and the vast majority of these NGOs felt that the Outcome Document should be integrated into the 2019 declaration as it represents the most recent and comprehensive consensus document.
- However, most respondents had not yet begun to see any notable local or national changes since adoption of the UNGASS Outcome Document and its operational recommendations.
- Almost all (95 per cent) of the NGO respondents felt as though their work addresses at least one of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals, and 19 per cent of respondents felt as though their work is cross-cutting and contributes towards *all 17* Goals.

The full consultation report is available at: [www.cstfondrugs.org](http://www.cstfondrugs.org)<sup>4</sup>

### III. Global Civil Society Hearing, New York, 20th February 2019

To support preparations for the 2019 ministerial segment, an interactive forum was held at the United Nations Headquarters in New York – co-hosted by the CSTF and the Permanent Mission of Mexico to the United Nations. The event sought to present a range of interventions from civil society experts from around the world, focused on the role of civil society in responding to drug-related challenges beyond 2019. The event was chaired by Ms. Heather Haase, Chair of the New York NGO Committee on drugs (NYNGOC).

Offering introductory remarks, H.E. Ambassador Juan Ramón de la Fuente of Mexico highlighted that civil society is indispensable to addressing the world drug problem and that dialogues such as these allow for a plurality of views and voices to be heard. Noting the advances achieved at the 2016 UNGASS, he reaffirmed Mexico’s commitment to implementing the Outcome Document and emphasized the need for international cooperation at a time when the challenges are growing more complex. He also stated that it remains a priority to align efforts with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, and for the United Nations to work in a coordinated manner with each agency “as equals” in addressing the world drug problem.

In his opening remarks, the Deputy Representative of UNODC in New York, Mr. Matteo Pasquali, reiterated that engaging with civil society is at heart of UNODC’s efforts. He noted that civil society has been actively engaged in the UNGASS and its preparations, and in continuing engagements at the Commission on Narcotic Drugs. He reaffirmed a commitment to work with civil society beyond 2019.

Dr. Vakharia presented the results from the global civil society consultation (as summarized above) – outlining the composition of respondents, the key findings, and some of the varying viewpoints of the NGO respondents in terms of what were considered achievements, trends or set-backs over the past decade.

This was followed by a panel of civil society speakers, moderated by Ms. Lisa Sanchez from the CSTF. The panel included presentations from Asia, the Middle East,

<sup>4</sup> The direct link to the report is: [https://www.cstfondrugs.org/app/download/16688093096/CSTF\\_Global\\_Consultation\\_-\\_Full\\_Results\\_Rport\\_-\\_Online.pdf](https://www.cstfondrugs.org/app/download/16688093096/CSTF_Global_Consultation_-_Full_Results_Rport_-_Online.pdf).

West and Southern Africa, Latin America and the United States – and included a mixture of in-person and video statements.

Several common themes arose across the civil society panel interventions, including: the need to support policies that improve the lives of people; the interconnected nature of the “world drug problem” and Sustainable Development Goals; and the work to “connect the dots” between individual health, public health, drug policy and development objectives. Several panellists also detailed how their research includes affected populations and is improving policy and health outcomes as a result, displaying how civil society is engaged in building the scientific evidence base for better drug policies.

Mr. Rodenie A. Olete from Sustained Health Initiatives of the Philippines (SHIP) discussed their work with people who use drugs living with HIV. He shared details of a research project collecting data from patients in order to create a training programme for health professionals to shift attitudes and perceptions and, in turn, impact upon the quality of healthcare provision for patients. The research identified a number of barriers to health service access, including stigma, a lack of trust and awareness, as well as existing drug policies.

Dr. Ebtesam Ahmed from the International Association for Hospice and Palliative Care (IAHPC) spoke of the globally inadequate access to pain medications. Man-made policy, manufacturing and distribution barriers have created the situation where pain medications are often unavailable in low- and middle-income countries. A general fear of prescribing controlled opioid-based medicines in many areas has resulted in low prescribing levels, which then lead to low estimates for the amounts of medicine needed.

Mr. Paul Vitale from Brightpoint Health (USA) detailed his organization’s holistic approach to treatment and harm reduction – including integrated health centres, recovery centres that remain open all hours, on-site access to opioid substitution treatment, and overdose and prevention programmes. He described the need for gender-sensitive services: for example, women who use drugs may need “wrap-around” services which account for additional considerations such as domestic violence, while many men benefit from classes on anger management. He also emphasised the value of working with local law enforcement agencies, as many patients are engaged with criminal justice systems.

Ms. Omoyemen Lucia Odigie-Emmanuel from the World Federation Against Drugs (Nigeria), spoke about the need for partnerships towards a drug-free world beyond 2019. She emphasised how drugs impact families, communities, countries and the entire world – especially across five key areas: social justice and gender, the environment, health, criminal justice, and the economy. Noting the threat these issues pose to development, she stated that the “world drug problem” cannot be addressed in a silo, and encouraged greater global partnerships for the next phase of drug policy, including consultation with civil society and all sectors of society.

Mr. Luis Mutombene from Associação Comunitária Ambiente da Mafalala (ACAM) provided insights into the situation for people who use drugs in Mozambique. He spoke of the high levels of incarceration for people who use drugs, and the availability of drugs in prisons. ACAM are working with the government and other stakeholders to collect the perspectives of civil society to inform a review of existing drug policy legislation. Consultations with affected communities found that people supported decriminalization of drug use, the end of arbitrary arrest, regulating cannabis for medical purposes, and not punishing the responsible consumption of cannabis.

Ms. Zara Snapp from Acción Técnica Social (Colombia) cautioned that the goal of a drug-free world is unachievable and actively harmful. Her organization runs drug checking programmes focused on reducing harms and understanding substances rather than just fearing them. She explained how her organization sees improved personal choices by people who use drugs as a result of the information they are provided. She discussed how cannabis regulation in some countries has led to

improved health and social outcomes, while tax income is used for schools and treatment, and equity programmes help women and minorities obtain licenses in some jurisdictions.

Ms. Sara Evli Özhan from the Turkish Green Crescent advocated for the role of civil society in addressing the “world drug problem”. She pointed out that many NGOs are disadvantaged, lacking funds and information, and highlighted the need to build capacities. The Green Crescent teaches therapy and consultancy models, and delivers prevention and treatment programmes with the purpose of contributing to the global knowledge base. Her organization connects its members to exchange good practices and to support their work with governments.

The panel presentations were then followed by an interactive discussion, in particular exploring how a gender perspective translates into responses at the ground level. Dr. Vakharia pointed out that gender had emerged as a priority area for many respondents who noted that their efforts address gender equality. Several panellists also explained how their work provides specific interventions for women and the LGBTQ community, including holistic approaches which account for health and social conditions. Access to medicines was also discussed by participants in the context of the overdose crisis in North America. The need for training and awareness was highlighted as an essential response, while ensuring that those in need of pain medication are not left untreated. The UNGASS Outcome Document’s dedicated chapter on access to medicines was cited as a milestone in this regard.

#### **IV. Global Civil Society Hearing, Vienna, 26th February 2019**

To further support preparations for the 2019 ministerial segment, a second interactive forum was held at the Vienna International Centre – co-hosted by the CSTF and the Permanent Mission of Switzerland. The Vienna Hearing had the same aims and structure as the New York event, and was chaired by Mr. Jamie Bridge, Chair of the Vienna NGO Committee on drugs (VNGOC).

Offering introductory remarks, the Chair of the Commission on Narcotic Drugs – H.E. Ambassador Mirghani Abbaker Altayeb Bakhiet from Sudan – recognized the need to promote strong partnerships with civil society, and acknowledged the work of the CSTF in sharing the practical experiences of NGOs working on the ground, and making constructive contributions to the Commission and the 2019 ministerial segment.

H.E. Mr. Yury Fedotov, the Executive Director of UNODC, also expressed his appreciation for the timely organization of this event and noted how the consultation shows that NGOs share many of the same concerns with the UNODC and member states. He welcomed the large number of respondents who saw the UNGASS Outcome Document as a helpful tool in their work, and shared details on how UNODC uses this document as guidance for their projects on the field. He reiterated UNODC’s continued commitment to supporting member states, and their consideration of NGOs as indispensable partners in promoting the health and safety of families and communities.

Further introductory remarks were then offered by H.E. Ambassador Claude Wild of Switzerland, who also commended the work of the CSTF both in the lead-up to the 2016 UNGASS and during the ongoing preparations for the ministerial segment in 2019. He praised civil society for the role they have played in shifting drug policies towards a greater focus on health and human rights since 2009, and highlighted how civil society is a serious and competent partner. He confirmed Switzerland’s commitment to fostering cooperation between member states, United Nations entities, the academic sector and civil society.

As in New York, Dr. Sheila Vakharia presented on the global civil society consultation (see above). This was then followed by a panel of civil society experts from Asia, the Middle East, Western and Eastern Europe, Africa, and Latin America. The interventions – including some by video – purposefully represented a wide range of different perspectives and interventions, reflecting the variety and diversity that

constitutes a strength of the civil society sector in this area. Nonetheless, several common themes emerged throughout the Hearing, such as: the need to include the voices of affected populations in decision-making processes; the need to respect human rights in all drug policies; and the need to acknowledge and overcome common challenges facing NGOs, such as financial uncertainty, lack of engagement, and the need for capacity building. The role that civil society can play in drug policy debates was also emphasised by many of the speakers.

Mr. Subhan Hamonangan from Rumah Cemara (Indonesia) spoke about difficulties faced by civil society in his region, and the shifts in drug policies that are needed to effectively address public health issues. These include investing in harm reduction services and ensuring meaningful consultation with NGOs in policy-making processes that impact upon people who use drugs.

Mr. Mousa Daoud from the Jordan Anti-Drugs Society shared his experience working with NGOs, first detailing the challenges that civil society face – such as inconsistent funding, a lack of capacity in NGO leadership and administration, the lack of communication and information exchange, and limited opportunities to speak to governments. He then offered insights about the opportunities that exist to overcome these. He concluded by sharing practical advice for member states to empower civil society at the local level.

Mr. Rajiv Kafle from Nava Kiran Plus (Nepal) offered his experience and attributed his HIV-positive status to the absence of harm reduction services when he needed them. He now takes care of orphans whose parents were victims of AIDS. He suggested a number of practical steps for alternative approaches to drug policies that can help to safeguard the future of young people. These included the decriminalisation of the possession, use and cultivation for personal use of drugs.

Ms. Hanne Cecilie Widnes from IOGT Norway then shared important insights about her innovative work with parents of adolescents and best practices through the “Strong & Clear” programme. This work is drug prevention targeted for youth, but delivered through family support and training to strengthen parenting skills and confidence. Her work seeks to mobilize parents to make a difference in their communities, in line with the UNGASS Outcome Document and the international standards on prevention.

Mr. Juan Ballestas Murcia from the Trenza Foundation (Colombia) delivered a speech focused on the importance of inclusivity within drug policy debates, the need to broaden the discussions about development models in the global south, and the need to gain public support for the important work that civil society does. He encouraged civil society to reflect on the wider movement they are a part of, and stressed the importance of grassroots actions.

Ms. Anna Mikhola from the National Anti-Drug Union (Russian Federation) presented her association’s work to improve networking and experience-sharing – including international conferences and the provision of data. She also emphasised the need for other like-minded NGOs to come together and enhance their efforts to reduce drug abuse. She stressed the important role that civil society plays in creating a healthy society.

Mr. Ravi Kandiah from the Foundation for Innovative Social Development (Sri Lanka) presented their work engaging with families, schools and communities to prevent substance abuse. He expressed concerns about the vacuum that is created when NGO services decrease due to a lack of government support, and called on member states to ensure the meaningful participation of civil society in the upcoming debates.

Ms. Myrtle Clarke from Fields of Green for All (South Africa) shared lessons from her organization’s involvement in cannabis-related policy reforms in South Africa, and shared her personal experience as someone whose home was raided by police for cannabis-related offences. She also emphasised the role of civil society in the global drug policy debate.

Ms. Cecilia Hajzler from Udruzenje Proslavi Oporavak (Bosnia and Herzegovina) also shared her personal story, this time as someone involved with recovery-oriented services in her region. Her organization runs a helpline to support access to treatment and guidance. Most of those who called wanted to be abstinent from drugs, and most were not in treatment. She proposed that recovery should be a primary goal for drug treatment, and highlighted the importance of community and grassroots organizations – emphasising how these organizations require more support from governments and other stakeholders.

Finally, a statement was also read on behalf of Tania Xilmena del Rosario Pastrana Uruena from the Latin American Association for Palliative Care – who was unable to travel for the Hearing. The statement stressed the importance of ensuring fair access to essential medicines for those in need, and shared some moving examples from the ground as well as some good practice examples from Latin America.

The Hearing closed with an interactive discussion between the stakeholders present, including member states, United Nations representatives and civil society. Interventions from Mexico, Norway, the Russian Federation and the USA all acknowledged the importance of the event, the results of the consultation, and the support for civil society participation. In the Russian Federation, the government is expanding dialogue with local NGOs at different levels. In Mexico, civil society have been centrally involved in the review of drug policies to better incorporate human rights, gender considerations, and appropriate rehabilitation and treatment. The Norwegian participant spoke about their valuable practice of having meetings between the Ministry of Health and civil society partners before each session of the Commission on Narcotic Drugs to discuss positions and priorities, and called on other member states to implement similar inclusive dialogues. Questions for the panel included the cost of prevention programmes, and how best to link-up NGOs at the international, regional, national and local levels.

## V. Conclusions

Since being relaunched in March 2018, the CSTF has played an active role in the proceedings and debates of the Commission on Narcotic Drugs. Civil society continues to add much-needed perspective, expertise and on-the-ground knowledge to drug policy dialogues, and to play a productive role at the local, national, regional and international levels.

While the civil society sector encompasses a wide range of views and perspectives, there are several areas in which consensus can be found, such as (inter alia): the need for continued engagement of civil society; the need for policies and programmes that contribute to public health and human rights; the need to engage those directly affected by drug policies; support for the 2016 UNGASS Outcome Document as a valuable tool; and the relevance of the Sustainable Development Goals to drug policies.<sup>5</sup>

The Task Force therefore calls on member states to ensure that these elements are captured in the outcome document from the March 2019 ministerial segment. We look forward to continued engagement with member states and the United Nations system throughout the coming decade.

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<sup>5</sup> These should be considered as building on the areas of consensus identified by the CSTF in its consultations in preparation for UNGASS 2016: <https://www.cstfondrugs.org/cstf-for-ungass-2016/documentation/cstf-findings-2016/>.