

Ceremonial Opening Segment of the 64th CND

Remarks from the VNGOC Chair, Jamie Bridge

12th April 2021

Your Excellency Madame Chair, distinguished delegates, ladies and gentlemen. It is an honour to be asked to speak today, as Chair of the Vienna NGO Committee on Drugs, as we mark the anniversaries of the 1961 and 1971 conventions.

The Vienna NGO Committee on Drugs represents more than 300 civil society organisations from all around the world. Our members range from global, professional networks, through to local community organisations working on the ground. Our role as an NGO Committee is to provide a link between all of these organisations and the policy making here in Vienna, ensuring the space for their voices to be heard. NGO engagement has become a strength of the CND, and we appreciate the efforts that have been made to protect this despite the exceptional challenges of the last twelve months.

In consulting with our network ahead of this statement, it was clear that some NGOs hold very different views about the drug control conventions themselves. But what I can say with confidence is that, 60 years on, these conventions remain central to the global response to drugs. Even though the world has changed immensely across all aspects of life, culture, society, globalisation, technology and so on – the conventions remain almost universally ratified, and their spirit of collective responsibility continues to galvanise action, funding and political urgency.

Furthermore, the convention's headline concern for 'health and the welfare' of humankind remains more relevant today than ever before. The conventions establish an evidence-driven process for scheduling, they include provisions for alternatives to punishment, and they seek to ensure access to controlled substances for medical and scientific use. This, along with so many of the other provisions and articles, remain essential for the work that we all do.

I guess it is a truism for all of us, including civil society, that 'failure to adapt is a failure to survive'. Guided by the conventions and universal human rights commitments, the CND has

continued to react to the changing drug markets, drug policies and even drug services over the years. As with all aspects of these debates, it is important that civil society is part of the CND discussions for the next 60 years as well.

In fact, ever since the very first meeting of the CND, non-governmental organisations have been amongst the official attendees, as it seems we were for the plenipotentiary conferences to adopt the conventions in 1961 and 1971.

Yet there is no explicit acknowledgement of civil society's unique contribution written into the conventions themselves. This is not a criticism – it merely reflects the era in which they were created.

In reality, civil society continues to play a vital role – in implementation, evidence-building, policy design and evaluation, advocacy, the promotion of public health, mental health and human rights, and in linking the work on the ground with the discussions here in Vienna. We have seen and welcomed the increase in civil society engagement at CND. Today, for example, hundreds of NGOs will be following the deliberations, even despite the COVID-19 restrictions.

But I am acutely aware of how fragile these gains may be without explicit, written commitments in place. For example, while we are acknowledging anniversaries this week, it has been exactly ten years since the last CND resolution on the role and importance of civil society (that was resolution 54/11). I hope that this is something that we can address together at a future CND.

To conclude, as we mark the anniversaries of the conventions, our collective attention and energy has to now be on the future. Effective, rights and public health based drug policies remain critical to the UN pillars of human rights, peace and security, and to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals.

We have much work that needs to be done – and we must continue to do it together. Thank you for your kind attention.