

Asia-Pacific conference sees through drug push

by Ross Colquhoun

The only rational explanation for the push to legalise illicit drugs is that some see it as an unparalleled business opportunity.

With a huge turnover estimated to be in the billions of dollars and the promise of enormous profits, to those pushing for legalisation the international illegal drug trade looks like an opportunity wasted on petty criminals and organised crime. Moreover the cost to governments to police the illegal drug trade almost makes it a crime not to legalise their sale.

This explanation for the push to legalise illicit drugs was raised at the Asia-Pacific Forum Against Drugs (APFAD), held in late August in Singapore.

Overwhelmingly popular surveys indicate that most people do not want illicit drugs legalised or regulated. Most governments and international organisations also see the folly of such a move. And yet this push to undermine the resolve of governments to protect their citizens and the opinions of the vast majority is being funded by a few large donors and pushed by sections of the media.

Of some concern to delegates at the forum were the efforts of pro-drug groups to change the direction of international agreements and conventions on illicit drugs at next year's United Nations General Assembly Special Session on Drugs (UNGASS, 2016).

Several speakers at APFAD from Europe, America and Asia drew a comparison between what happened when tobacco was promoted and marketed by multinational corporations and what could happen if illicit drugs are similarly regulated. Societies worldwide continue to be burdened by the crippling cost of dealing with the effect on the health of millions of smokers

who became addicted to tobacco. Governments are now spending millions of dollars to try to reverse what is now widely seen as a terrible mistake.

Delegates at APFAD representing many Asia-Pacific nations called on all governments to learn from the past to resist the propaganda war waged by a few wealthy people to legalise drugs and to make a stand for a drug-free world to protect our children, families and communities.

Speakers also drew attention to the fact that to promote the legalisation of illicit drugs the media have perpetuated myths that sound convincing but that, as shown by the evidence, turn out to be false. The idea that the "War on Drugs" has failed and so we should legalise drugs is as sensible as saying the wars on poverty, homelessness, polio or on human-trafficking have failed, so we should give up.

Or the idea that illicit drugs in an uncontrolled, untested form of unknown dosage or strength and delivered by an unsafe route should be legalised for medicinal purposes. This argument is but a Trojan horse for recreational drug legalisation. Use of drugs of all kinds for scientific or medical purposes is already exempt from international conventions on illicit drugs. Moreover, if there were a legitimate use, as is the case for morphine derived from opiates, it would have been exploited by the abovementioned entrepreneurs and their associates by now.

Another myth is that these entrepreneurs are "protecting the rights" of injecting drug users. They perpetuate the idea that injecting and using drugs is essentially a harmless, normal and legitimate pastime that is wrongfully denied to many who would like to do so but are deterred by the prohibition laws and the threat of punishment.

This is merely exploiting the plight of injecting drug users who do not live "normal" lives, who desperately cling to their status as a wrongfully persecuted marginalised group. All that is left for this sad and desperate group to salvage what little is left of their self-esteem is the notion that as an oppressed group they are defending their human right to stick a needle in their arm, and risk death or disease every time they do it. It is equally sad that a gullible few, in the guise of compassion, would want to defend this so-called right.

For years the Australian Government under the banner of AusAID and the Asia-Pacific Drugs and Development Issues Committee (APDDIC) preached a message of harm minimisation to Asian and Pacific governments. Without any evidence as to its effectiveness these groups pushed policies advocating needle exchange, opiate substitutes such as methadone, and "safe" injecting rooms.

The over 200 delegates from all over the Asia Pacific loudly and roundly repudiated this agenda. They rejected the underlying message that drug use is inevitable and that there is nothing we can do but to allow it and to protect from harm those who do it. To them this was the path to accessibility and permissibility that the commercial exploiters thrive on.

For the entrepreneurs, there is a ready and captive market, an easily and cheaply obtained raw material coupled with low manufacturing costs and attractive profit margins. If the legal constraints are removed, these entrepreneurs can market the product to a vulnerable group of mainly young and disadvantaged people; and there are many markets yet to be exploited. To hear that it is normal and acceptable behaviour that can be done safely is music to their ears.

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For more information on APFAD go to www.ncada.org.sg

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