

**High-level General Assembly Thematic Debate
in support of the process towards the
2016 Special Session of the General Assembly on the World Drug Problem**

New York, 7 May 2015

President's Summary

Introduction

The President of the General Assembly convened a High-level Thematic Debate in support of the process towards the 2016 Special Session of the General Assembly on the World Drug Problem on 7 May 2015. The debate was organized pursuant to resolution 69/201 of the General Assembly, requesting the President of the General Assembly, in cooperation with the Commission on Narcotic Drugs (CND), as the central policymaking body within the United Nations system dealing with drug-related matters and having the leading role in the preparation of the special session of the Assembly, to hold such a thematic debate with Member States and other stakeholders.

The debate addressed progress in the implementation of the *Political Declaration and Plan of Action on International Cooperation towards an Integrated and Balanced Strategy to Counter the World Drug Problem*, including an assessment of the achievements and challenges in countering the world drug problem, within the framework of the three international drug control conventions and other relevant United Nations instruments by, *inter alia*, “addressing measures to reach an effective balance between supply and demand reduction measures and addressing all the consequences of the world drug problem, including in the health, social, human rights, economic, justice and security fields”. It also served as an opportunity to discuss and highlight concrete measures to strengthen international cooperation and promote the effective implementation of the *Political Declaration and Plan of Action's* underlying principle of “common and shared responsibility” in addressing the world drug problem.

Key Messages

The one-day High-level Thematic Debate consisted of an opening session, a plenary session with high-level representatives and two interactive panel discussions addressing the achievements and challenges by Member States in countering the world drug problem; and the importance for Member States of implementing a multi-dimensional and multi-stakeholder approach in addressing the world drug problem, respectively. Interventions from the floor followed both interactive panels with a closing segment concluding the event. The following are the key messages that were shared by participants throughout the High-level Thematic Debate:

Preparations for UNGASS 2016: Many speakers reaffirmed their support for the CND as the central policymaking body in the United Nations on drug-related issues and acknowledged its leading role in preparations for the UNGASS. They noted that UNGASS could serve as a milestone towards the 2019 target date for the review of the *Political Declaration and Plan of Action*. Furthermore, they underscored that UNGASS should avail Member States and other

stakeholders an opportunity to engage in an open and transparent, evidence-based discussion on the achievements and remaining challenges, including those pertaining to the spread of new psychoactive substances (NPS). It was noted that a special segment on UNGASS preparations was held during the 58th session of the CND in March 2015 involving interactive discussions on several key thematic areas, including; drugs and health; drugs and crime; drugs and development, as well as cross cutting issues, including; human rights and new challenges, threats and approaches. It was highlighted that these interactive discussions included the exchange of expertise, practical experiences and lessons learned by Member States, United Nations entities and agencies and civil society, and that the chairs' summaries are available on the UNGASS 2016 website (www.ungass2016.org).

Drugs and Health: Participants underscored that health care and social protection must be part of any comprehensive approach to the world drug problem. They noted that the world drug problem affects national institutions and challenges overburdened health systems, especially in developing countries. Sharing their national experiences, some participants underlined that there is compelling evidence that the countries that integrated public health aspects into their drug control efforts realized greater social benefits, while also enhancing the rule of law and the safety of their citizens. In this regard, they emphasized the need to exert more efforts to effectively treat, rehabilitate and socially reintegrate drug dependent persons, in line with the three international drug control conventions. Participants emphasized the importance of public awareness campaigns as a preventive measure, focusing on the most vulnerable groups, especially the youth. Participants also noted that drug regulation should take into account the need to ensure the availability of and accessibility to controlled substances for medical and scientific purposes while avoiding their diversion to use for other purposes.

Drugs and Crime: Speakers underlined the perilous link between drug trafficking and terrorism, extremism, armed conflict and trafficking in small arms and light weapons. They noted that drug trafficking finances violent non-state actors, thus destabilizing governments and endangering the safety of communities. It was also stressed that drug trafficking flourishes in places that are already affected by conflict, which in turn exacerbates and further destabilizes the situation. In this vein, some speakers underscored the importance of fighting corruption and money laundering with a view to bolster local, national, regional and international efforts to address the drug problem. Given these threats, speakers stressed the importance of combating drug trafficking as a regional and international security issue, including by supporting the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and making effective use of its policies and programmes. In this regard, some speakers also stressed the importance of the seizure of drugs-related proceeds, and shared their national experiences on how they have put seized assets to constructive use, including in the health and education sectors.

Drugs and Development: Participants noted that drugs and crime undermine social and economic development, the rule of law, and threaten the security and stability of countries and societies. A number of speakers emphasized that the socio-economic phenomenon of drugs should be addressed by empowering communities and reducing their vulnerabilities. They also noted that those involved in the production of drugs are often members of vulnerable groups, which struggle to identify opportunities for alternative livelihoods. In this context, speakers called for alternative development measures to be promoted to tackle the root causes of drug cultivation,

underlining that only by addressing poverty and the lack of opportunities can such problems be addressed in a sustainable manner. They underscored, in this regard, the importance of addressing and integrating the world drug problem into the post-2015 development agenda. Speakers also noted the impact of drug crime and drug abuse on youth, which is often compounded by poverty, lack of skills, education and employment. While suggesting several measures to address these challenges, participants noted that families, caretakers, educators and community leaders have particularly important roles to play in providing guidance and alternatives to young people.

Human Rights: Speakers highlighted the importance of aligning drug policies with human rights commitments, and of placing people and societies at the centre of such policies. Many also pointed out that a balanced drug policy approach must uphold human rights, including through health and social risks and harm reduction measures, and by devoting special attention to the most vulnerable – particularly youth, women and children. The need for a people-centered approach, in-line with the principles of non-discrimination, human dignity, solidarity, the rule of law and human rights, including the right to life and the right to health, was highlighted by some as integral to the efforts to address the drug problem. Many interventions called for the use of the full range criminal justice tools to ensure proportionality of sentencing and the promotion of alternatives to incarceration, where appropriate. In this regard, they proposed that custodial measures should be reserved for the most dangerous drug trade offenders, not the weakest and most vulnerable drug chain participants. Some speakers asserted that the death penalty should not be used under any circumstances, while others reported that the “zero tolerance approach” had produced drug- and crime-free societies. A few speakers welcomed the engagement and contributions of the Human Rights Council to the UNGASS 2016, including through its resolution A/HRC/28/L.22, of March 2015.

Regional and International Cooperation and Partnerships: Participants called for the strengthening of international cooperation and the promotion of comprehensive policies based on international commitments by States. They noted that a comprehensive approach would necessitate technical assistance to all affected States, including transit States, to address the multitude of challenges precipitated by the illicit drug trade. They highlighted the need for regional approaches and cooperation given the proximity, commonalities and knowledge of the challenges facing them. They also emphasized the importance of regional and international cooperation in information sharing and capacity building; including in collecting and processing data; disrupting and dismantling organized criminal networks; and extradition and judicial assistance. Concerning partnerships, speakers encouraged the participation of civil society, religious leaders, local authorities, scientific institutions and others in the development and implementation, as well as in the monitoring and evaluation of drug policies. They also underlined the importance of fostering greater coordination between UNODC, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), the World Health Organization (WHO), the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) and others to ensure balanced results, and stressed that the CND and UNODC must continue to lead these efforts.

Implementation of the International Drug Control Conventions: Many speakers underscored the importance of the full implementation of the three international drug conventions, which they

said, remain the best tools for achieving progress in addressing the world drug problem. They noted that when applied together with other relevant international instruments, including the United Nations Convention against Corruption (UNCAC) and the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (UNTOC), as well as relevant international human rights instruments, the conventions could promote an effective response to the world drug problem. In this regard they stressed that States and regions should have flexibility to pursue their own responses to domestic and regional challenges, while respecting the legitimate interests of other States and regions.

Approaches: Participants underlined the need for a more comprehensive approach to address the world drug problem, taking into account different national and regional realities and circumstances, in full adherence of the three drug control conventions. They stressed the importance of the human dimension of the drug issue and called for a greater focus on public health, rehabilitation and reintegration. Some speakers noted that decriminalization has allowed for the creation of a legal framework to reduce the negative impact of drug use, while others argued against the legalization of narcotic drugs. While this discussion was underway, it was cautioned that some of these approaches were still in the experimental phase and thus required further evaluation to assess their effectiveness in addressing the world drug problem.

New challenges and threats: Speakers noted that the spread of new substances was a major challenge, which should be further explored in the context of the UNGASS 2016. In the meantime, they called for strategies to address the proliferation of NPS and amphetamine, the dynamic illicit drug market, use and abuse of technology, prevention of diversion of precursors and essential chemicals used in the production of drugs, and the link between drugs and organized crime, including wildlife and forest crime.

UNODC: Many speakers noted the valuable expertise and technical assistance provided by UNODC to States through its integrated, interlinked country, regional and global programmes and its network of field offices. Others highlighted UNODC's important contributions through its research activities, health-based approaches to treating drug addiction and countering the spread of HIV, as well as its work on harm reduction and alternative development. Speakers also noted the SADC-UNODC joint programme on drugs, the Container Control Programme and the global SMART programme as being particularly effective. Some participants called on Member States to provide UNODC with adequate, predictable and stable resources.

Conclusion

The High-level Thematic Debate featured informed and insightful contributions on how best to address challenges presented by the world drug problem. As such, it contributed to the ongoing UNGASS 2016 preparatory process by fostering an open and inclusive discussion on good practices, lessons learned and strategies pertaining to drug use, production and trafficking. The perspectives of a wide range of stakeholders were heard, including those of Member States, relevant United Nations entities, international and regional organizations, civil society and the scientific community – underlining the importance of a comprehensive, multi-dimensional and collaborative approach to finding practical and sustainable solutions to the drug issues facing communities throughout the world.