



Press release

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New report: UN stuck in denial over cannabis regulation

While the global drug control regime reaches moment of truth

Swansea/Amsterdam, 12 March 2014 – The current trend towards legal regulation of the cannabis market has become irreversible and requires an urgent dialogue by UN member states on the best models for protecting people's health and safety, argues a new report. The question facing the international community today is no longer whether there is a need to revise the UN drug control system, but rather when and how to do it.

The Rise and Decline of Cannabis Prohibition: the History of Cannabis in the UN drug control system and options for reform - by the Transnational Institute and the Global Drug Policy Observatory - is released the day before UN member states gather in Vienna for a special '[high level segment](#)' of the annual UN Commission on Narcotic Drugs (CND).

The report unveils the long and little-known history of cannabis regulation from the late 19th century when it was widely used for medical, ceremonial and social purposes to the post-WWII period when US pressure and a potent mix of moralistic rhetoric and unreliable scientific data succeeded in categorising cannabis as a drug with 'particularly dangerous properties' on a par with heroin in the 1961 Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs. It also brings the history up-to-date with more recent developments as an increasing number of countries have shown discomfort with the treaty regime's strictures through 'soft defections', such as turning a blind eye, decriminalisation, coffeeshops, cannabis social clubs and generous medical marijuana schemes. These have stretched the legal flexibility of the conventions to sometimes questionable limits.

Tom Blickman of the Transnational Institute and co-author of the report said, "The UN drug control agencies, such as the INCB and UNODC, too often treat the three drugs conventions (1961, 1971 and 1988) like the tablets of stone given to Moses, immutable pillars of truth that can not be questioned nor reformed." The history of cannabis control, as outlined in the report, reveals however that decisions made in the past were often based on political negotiations, unsubstantiated allegations and colonial and racist attitudes, according to Blickman. "The inclusion of cannabis in the UN drug control system more than 50 years ago was an historical error and needs to be re-assessed."

Martin Jelsma of the Transnational Institute and co-author added, "It is time for the UN and member states to open their eyes and acknowledge that, due to systemic flaws and anachronistic provisions in the conventions, countries in search of alternative cannabis policies have no choice other than breaching the treaties in order to better protect people's health, safety and human rights".

The report outlines specific options for reform and assesses their potential for success. These options

include: WHO review and modification of cannabis scheduling; state parties amending the treaties; modifying the conventions 'inter se' between specific states only; or denunciation of the treaty and re-accession with a reservation (carried out recently by Bolivia in order to defend indigenous rights and the use of coca leaf in its natural form).

Dave Bewley-Taylor, co-author of the report and director of the Global Drug Policy Observatory said: "A promising way forward is for a group of like-minded countries to work together to assess different legal options and determine a roadmap for modernisation. This might lead to replacing the existing drug control treaties with a new framework, one more consistent with other UN treaties on human rights and in line with the latest scientific evidence on the best ways to reduce the harms associated with drug use."

The meetings in Vienna this and next week, which review the 2009 Political Declaration and Plan of Action on the 'World Drug Problem' and seek to outline plans for the UN General Assembly Special Session on drugs in 2016, is an ideal time to start that dialogue.

Download the report at: <http://www.undrugcontrol.info/rise-and-decline>

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