





Inter-Parliamentary Union
For democracy. For everyone.

 (212) 557 58 80
 (212) 557 39 54

Office of the Permanent
Observer to the United Nations
336 East 45th Street, 10th Floor
New York, NY 10017
USA

Statement by Hon. Paddy Torsney Permanent Observer

Special Session of the United Nations General Assembly on the World Drug Problem

19-21 April 2016

New York, 20 April 2016

Mr. President,

Parliamentarians are among the first witnesses to the impacts of drug policy. They interact with their constituents who fear their children are at risk, who ask why treatment is unavailable, who require legal services to avoid prosecution, or who simply need someone to listen to their concerns.

Parliamentarians are directly involved in establishing the legal framework and regulations that govern drugs in their countries, and they pass budgets for health care, education and rehabilitation that help curb the effects of drugs.

In February, the UN and IPU held a joint Parliamentary Hearing in preparation for this special session.

The Hearing built on discussions on drug issues at several IPU Assemblies as policy repercussions are felt all around the world.

The Hearing made it clear that drug addiction is not far removed from other addictions, like alcohol and tobacco, that not all drugs are the same, and that not all drug users become addicted.

For these and many other reasons, parliamentarians believe the world's response to the drug problem must be compassionate and considerate. It must start by looking at drug use as a health issue, without stigma or discrimination.

Although consensus was not reached on several agenda items, the Hearing addressed many misunderstandings and set the stage for further political debate in national parliaments. The hearing did reveal a degree of common ground, on four key points:

First, the three main drug conventions provide a framework to guide policy in all countries. Countries should not go it alone.

Second, many countries are interpreting the conventions too narrowly, without considering their flexibilities. Under the conventions, while the production, sale and use of drugs must remain illegal, punishment for those law breakers does not require *imprisonment*. Many parliamentarians were unaware of this.

Third, all countries should focus more on tackling the root causes of drug use, not just their effects. If people are helped out of poverty, if health care and education are available, and institutions more transparent, and if their representatives pro-actively implement the new SDGs, the drivers of the drug problem will be undercut.

Fourth, more attention must be paid to the unintended consequences of the so-called war on drugs, including the expansion of a lucrative drug market and its associated criminality.

Many participants questioned the wisdom of investing huge resources on law enforcement at the expense of prevention and treatment, and expressed concern for the unrelenting focus on small producers and users as opposed to the large cartels which are responsible for the worst crimes.

As an MP noted: the war on drugs has become a war on the poor! This is one unintended consequence that the anti-poverty, people-centered SDGs call on us to remedy urgently.

Mr. President,

Drug policies must respect human rights, including the right of indigenous people to their traditional livelihoods, the right of drug users to treatment, and of course the most sacrosanct right of all – the right to life. Several participants spoke strongly against the use of the death penalty for drug-related crimes.

The Parliamentary Hearing brought to light a need for more coherent national policies to replace a patchwork of legislation and measures that many countries have adopted over the years. All countries should perform a comprehensive review of their drug problem and on that basis design an integrated, balanced strategy in consultation with all concerned individuals and organizations.

This issue must remain high on the agenda globally and nationally, especially for parliamentarians.

While many are satisfied with the existing legal frameworks and with the general response to the problem so far, many others are not.

We must listen carefully to the growing concern that the global response to the drug problem is not working. We must design policy based on the facts as they are, rather than on ideology or an idealized picture of the world.

Thank you.