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INTERNATIONAL DRUG POLICY CONSORTIUM

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**CIVIL SOCIETY  
INVOLVEMENT IN THE  
EUROPEAN UNION  
DRUG STRATEGY**

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**IDPC BRIEFING PAPER 3**

# CIVIL SOCIETY INVOLVEMENT IN THE EUROPEAN UNION DRUG STRATEGY

**The International Drug Policy Consortium (IDPC) ([www.idpc.info](http://www.idpc.info)) is a global network of 25 national and international NGOs that specialise in issues related to illegal drug use. The Consortium aims to promote objective and open debate on the effectiveness, direction and content of drug policies at national and international level, and supports evidence-based policies that are effective in reducing drug-related harm. It disseminates the reports of its member organisations about particular drug-related matters. In addition, the Consortium itself produces briefing papers and commentaries on the main international debates in this field. It offers expert consultancy services to policymakers and officials around the world.**

The 25 member states of the European Union agreed a new overarching drug strategy, covering the period 2005-2012, in December 2005. The strategy sets out a set of objectives, principles, and priority activities agreed by all member states and the institutions of the European Union, and is to be backed up by two four-year action plans. The first of these action plans includes a commitment to developing a more positive engagement with civil society in the implementation and review of the strategy. This is a very welcome inclusion, as civil society has much to offer in this field, either through professional bodies with specific areas of expertise, community organisations providing direct information on latest trends, or representatives of drug user or family organisations providing a perspective from those most acutely affected by policy decisions. However, it must be recognised that previous commitments to improved engagement with civil society in EU documents have not been translated into robust and respectful arrangements for communication and inclusion.

The International Drug Policy Consortium therefore welcomes the production of a Green Paper by the European Commission that asks for views on effective mechanisms to further enhance the co-operation with European civil society. We believe that the concepts and objectives introduced by the Green Paper represent a new opportunity for more sensible and meaningful discussions on drug policy issues, which can be mutually beneficial for all participating stakeholders. European civil society organisations working in the drugs field encompass an array of professionals including: policy experts; community organisations; drug user groups; educational, treatment and harm reduction service providers; as well as faith-based organisations. Due to their accumulated expertise, their first-hand information from the field as well as their diverse historical, cultural and ideological background, they have the potential to successfully inform and participate in European drug policy formation, implementation and evaluation.

Despite the call for the involvement of civil society in EU drug affairs as stipulated by previous EU Drug Strategies, recommendations of the European Parliament, policy papers and conference presentations, this expertise and knowledge has not

been utilised effectively and efficiently. The issue of co-operation with civil society remained largely a rhetorical exercise with a lack of trust on both sides. This changed in January 2006 when the European Commission organised a conference to explore and discuss the possibilities to set up a structured and continuous dialogue between the Commission and citizen's organisation. We believe this conference opened up a new opportunity for a major step forward for all stakeholders committed to the development of pragmatic, rational and humane drug policies and the betterment of services.

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## Reflections on the Objectives of the Co-operation

In the IDPC's view, the Commission's main aims involving civil society represent a sensible starting point for further discussions. Supporting policy formulation and implementation through practical advice; ensuring an effective two-way information flow, as well as stimulating networking among civil society organisations are clear and useful targets. Nevertheless we acknowledge the fact that creating a representative mechanism to achieve these targets is not an easy task. Civil society organisations in the drugs field do not form a homogenous group which can be easily compartmentalised. On the contrary, they represent diversity of various moral, ideological and scientific approaches. Therefore the Forum should have an open character (Correlation) that leaves room for various opinions. On the one hand, we understand the Commission's view that the dialogue should be pragmatic, and lengthy ideological debates can result in dysfunctional operation (BFDPP). Yet, on the other hand the Commission should not reduce the role of civil society as a mere implementation tool of a given drug strategy and action plan (HCLU and TNI). Therefore we recommend that while mainly focussing on the issues defined by the EU Action Plan, the dialogue should not exclude the possibility of creating an ideological platform to discuss different options for policy decision makers in the field of drug policy (HCLU, ERIT and TNI).

## IDPC's Comments on the Structure of the Dialogue

As a vehicle to achieve the Commission's objectives, the Green Paper on the Role of Civil Society in Drugs Policy in the European Union offers two alternatives: a Civil Society Forum on Drugs and a thematic linking of existing networks.

Based on the outlined concepts in the Green Paper, the idea of a Forum appears to be better considered in relation to the supposition of thematic links among existing networks. Nevertheless, in the IDPC's view both ideas have advantages and disadvantages. For instance, the format of a single Forum would not provide an in-depth view into particular aspects of drug policy. At the same time, the reduction of the dialogue to thematic linking of professional networks may be beneficial for operating networks, but could easily exclude others (BFDPP). Therefore most of our members agree upon developing a mechanism which incorporates both concepts.

We agree with the preliminary suggestions of the Commission's Green Paper on the structure of the Forum and the non-exhaustive list of selection criteria of its members<sup>1</sup>:

- Representation of different stakeholders and different policy options should be balanced to avoid one-sided views.
- The Forum would be chaired by the Commission which would also be responsible for certain practical aspects and for ensuring continuity of the work.
- Membership of the Forum would be fixed for a certain period of time. Participants would have to fulfil a set of criteria to be eligible.
- The organisation has to correspond to the concept of civil society as set out in the Green Paper.
- The organisation has to have its main base of operation in an EU member state or a candidate country. Organisations from European Neighbourhood Policy Countries may also participate, when appropriate.
- Priority will be given to those organisations that are established in the form of transnational networks covering a number of Member States and/or candidate countries.
- The organisation has to have drug related activities as the core focus of its activities. Organisations covering directly different aspects (e.g. treatment, prevention) would be selected to ensure broad coverage of the drugs issue.

- **Credibility:** Organisations should have a clear track record of their activities.
- **Representation:** Organisations should be recognised as being able to speak on behalf of those they claim to represent.
- Within these criteria, the Commission would select members for the Forum on the basis of an open call, after it has received and analysed reactions to this Green Paper and published its report.

Further to these criteria, we would strongly suggest that one is added demanding that any member of the Forum be committed to conducting debate with respect for different viewpoints, and in a spirit of examining and learning from available evidence. We therefore offer the following specific opinions and suggestions of how the future engagement with Civil Society can work:

### 1. Structure of the Dialogue

- The dialogue should be structured into a General Assembly and a Civil Society Forum (BFDPP, ERIT and TNI).
- The General Assembly is an open gathering of Civil Society organisations and individuals, and can be held every second year, or more frequently if it is deemed necessary (BFDPP, ERIT and TNI).
- The Forum is a representative group of around 10-20 Civil Society organisations or networks, which should meet twice a year, or more frequently if it is deemed necessary, to provide a regular input into the formal Council and Commission agendas (BFDPP, ERIT, TNI and Correlation).
- IDPC members have different views about the possibility of a thematic linking of existing networks offered by the Commission. Although there is no single IDPC view on the working structure of thematic areas and work groups, all members feel the need of addressing particular themes. Most of our members consider the General Assembly and the Forum are sufficient vehicles for a dialogue. Some argue that thematic groups would pose difficulties for the Commission in trying to construct a coherent civil society viewpoint across the EU and between all the competing perspectives (DrugScope). By contrast, other members suggest that identifying key thematic areas are essential (ERIT and TNI). ERIT's view is that there should be a specific thematic group looking at issues of treatment, care, rehabilitation, harm reduction and social inclusion. This group could also support and co-ordinate action on various aspects of the EU Action Plan. There could also be a thematic group looking at prevention. TNI suggests another thematic area, which is the

<sup>1</sup> COM(2006) 316 final, *Green Paper on the Role of Civil Society in Drugs Policy in the European Union*. Brussels, 26.6.2006, pp. 8

RELEX-side of the drugs agenda: Alternative Development, EU position at UN meetings, EU drug control strategies for Afghanistan, relations with Andean region etc. The thematic linking of existing networks can share information on best practices, effective responses etc. This network of networks should have a close, sometimes day-to-day relationship with the Commission in discussing actual questions and challenges in the field. This will provide the Commission with technical assistance and facilitate effective and fast cooperation between civil society and the Commission. (HCLU)

- Others can see a role for Commission-sponsored conferences, seminars or ad-hoc meetings focussing on particular topical themes bringing together networks and stakeholders of common interest (DrugScope, TNI, and BFDPP). Such events could also inform the workings of the proposed Civil Society Forum on Drugs. If successful, it would give weight and credibility to the role of Civil Society at the level of international drug policy formulation (DrugScope). Further advantage is that such meetings can be more flexible and be convened when urgent and specific policy dilemmas arise; both Commission and the Forum should be able to take the initiative to organise/propose such events for dialogue on specific issues (TNI). Existing European networks in the field can facilitate, mediate and support the process. (Correlation and BFDPP)

## 2. Selection Criteria for the Dialogue

- The participants should clearly express their commitment to respectful dialogue on the principle of effectiveness and evidence (BFDPP).
- The General Assembly can consist of various organisations, which may or may not belong to existing thematic networks. Consequently the Assembly can ensure that the voice of lesser organised or marginalised groups can be heard (BFDPP).
- The Forum should consist of ten-twenty members representing existing organisations or professional networks.
- The Forum should include in its membership organisations that can speak on behalf of drug users and/or their families. Speaking about a dialogue on drug policy cannot be taken seriously if those who are affected are not integrated and involved in the developments. Drug use is a phenomenon of mainstream society, but has a wide range of effects under particular groups of marginalized people: youth, homeless people, migrants, illegal persons, sex workers, ethnic minorities like Roma. A Forum has to represent the views of these groups as well. (Correlation)

- IDPC members suggest two alternative approaches to recruiting to the Forum. One of them is based on a national selection scheme, the other one primarily draws on particular expertise without borders. The national scheme would start with a national fora convened by the State. In order to secure government support in each state for the work and resourcing of national fora these governments would be invited to hold annual fora to inform and prioritise issues to be taken to an EU fora. Mandated delegates from the national fora could participate in the European Forum. The national fora could operate on thematic lines that discuss Community responses, and NGO responses to education & prevention, treatment and rehabilitation as well as supply reduction (DPAG). Despite acknowledging the need for strengthening national-level mechanism for NGO participation in drug policy making, others have doubts about the DPAG proposal on the national-based Forum structure. It can open endless consultation process based on national agendas and can slow down the process considerably because many EU countries do not yet have national NGO platform. Furthermore it is argued that an EU-level process should not be too dependent on the state of national civil society participation mechanism. Therefore directly building on European NGO networks and areas of expertise is more sensible. (TNI and BFDPP)

- The other approach involves the identification of groups (or perspectives) that would ideally be represented at the Forum (for example users/families, health professionals, enforcement professionals, policy analysts etc), then inviting organisations to apply for membership against these perspectives, and the selection criteria listed, and selecting the best mix from applications received. (BFDPP)

## 3. Responsibilities of the General Assembly and the Forum Members

- The members of the Forum should take full responsibility for active participation in the work of the Forum within the standards and criteria outlined above. (BFDPP)
- The Forum secretariat should produce agendas for each Forum meeting, that give members time to consult on and prepare views and proposals.
- Forum members should be responsible for proactively consulting with the constituency they represent, and bring views and proposals to Forum meetings.
- Forum members, based on discussion at Forum meetings, should agree and prepare notes on particular agenda items to be formally submitted to the relevant Commission or Council body.

- The organisers of the General Assembly should ensure that its content and proceedings are both relevant to the competence and current agendas of the EU, give open opportunity for contributions from interested organisations, and present findings and recommendations in a clear and constructive manner.

While these mechanisms are being developed, the Consortium will produce a further Briefing Paper summarising our views on the occasion of the first annual review of the drug strategy action plan, due in December 2006.

#### *4. Key Tasks of the General Assembly and the Forum*

- The Forum should have the mandate to discuss drug policy issues and make recommendations for EU policy decision makers in the process of forming, implementing and evaluating drug strategies and action plans (HCLU, BFDPP and TNI).
- A lot of research has been done on the effects of drug use, drug policy and methodology issues, a lot of research will be done in the future. However, most of this evidence disappears in the desks of decision makers and is not used to establish new approaches. The General Assembly and the Forum should put a lot of energy into improving the link between research, decision makers and practitioners in the field within Europe. (Correlation and TNI).
- The summary conclusions of the General Assembly and the Forum should be presented at the HDG and the European Parliament, as well as disseminated within the Commission's relevant bodies (BFDPP and TNI).

#### *5. Resources for Forum Members*

- The Commission should provide resources to the members of the Forum to enable them to consult widely, and therefore productively convey a representative view as well as assemble and distribute necessary information. The Commission should make available resources to enable the organisation of a General Assembly every two years. If the thematic groups or seminars are established, resources should be available to manage the work groups or convene the thematic events on regular basis.

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## **Conclusion**

The European Commission's Green Paper on the Role of Civil Society in Drugs Policy outlines a useful framework for the engagement of citizen's organisations in relevant policymaking processes. Despite the challenges for all participants, a permanent and structured dialogue has the potential to improve the current situation. The IDPC offers its participation in the process. We are committed to contribute to the harmonisation of the political and strategic drug policy objectives of the EU with the needs of its citizens in addressing and managing the drug phenomenon.