

The UN's drugs policy; right at last or so, so wrong?

29 June The UNA Westminster branch meeting followed the 'UN General Assembly Special Session on the World Drug Problem' (UNGASS) which had been triggered by an accelerated review process prior to the formal review conference in 2019. It was chaired by Baroness Meacher, Co-Chair of the All Party Parliamentary Group on Drug Policy Reform, who hailed the UNGASS as a 'moment of transformation', seeing it as the moment when the UN had turned its back on the concept of a 'war on drugs'.

HE Mr Nestor Osorio, Ambassador of Colombia, referred to his country's painful experience as an unwilling source of coca, controlled by local mafia groups and the subsequent recognition for a coordinated approach. This was taken by president Santos and the presidents of neighbouring states. He spoke about valuable guidance documentation from the LSE in London which managed to prompt international debate, despite opposition from Russia and China. The emphasis on moving this debate into the human rights field, citing health priorities - the drug user is a patient, not a delinquent - was a key move. He feels confident that the summit in 2019 will be successful, the necessary 'transition' to which Baroness Meacher referred being progressed. We should concentrate on the real enemies, the traffickers, the money launderers and the dealers in chemical precursors.

Steve Rolles, senior policy analyst of the Transform Drug Policy Foundation, stated that the UN's general policy of prohibition has put the drugs trade in the hands of criminals and led to suffering for millions. UNGASS sought to change that but only with limited success. The war on drugs will become the war on drug abuse, a small but significant shift. He praised the submissions to UNGASS made by [fifteen UN agencies](#) but reflected that traditional schisms between member states showed up, preventing, for instance, indicators making it into the Outcome Document.

Anne-Marie Cockburn, whose daughter Martha had died of an accidental ecstasy overdose, movingly recounted the effect of this tragedy on both family and friends. Now Anne-Marie works with the awareness charity *Anyone's Child* where [her full story](#) is reported. She described her visits to schools and prisons.

Chris Ford, Clinical Director of International Doctors for Healthier Drugs Policies, reported on her impressions of the UNGASS which was less optimistic than that of ambassador Osorio. A wide-ranging Question and Answer session followed, covering points from the aggressive and selfish high-level politicking between UN Member States to the continuing challenges in prison education, racial stereotyping of addicts and inconsistently presented government guidance.

The meeting is the first to tackle this issue for ten years. UNA members present noted that, even though UNGASS, albeit not its formal outcome document, shows clear advances, these have been less impressive than members would have hoped.