



THE ENCOD BULLETIN ON DRUG POLICY IN EUROPE

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A matter of transparency

In order to gain the hearts and minds of European citizens for the collective project called the European Union, the European Commission has launched the Transparency Initiative (see http://ec.europa.eu/commission_barroso/kallas/transparency_en.htm). The aim of this initiative is to increase openness and accessibility of EU institutions, raise awareness of the use of the EU budget and make the Union's institutions more accountable to the public.

On October 10th, EU Commissioner Siim Kallas presented this initiative during a seminar in Brussels. ENCOD attended the seminar and posed Mr. Kallas the following question: **could the current way in which the European Commission Directorate for Justice, Freedom and Security handles the consultation of civil society in the design and implementation of drug policies be described as transparent?**

In January 2006, the Commission announced that a 'genuine dialogue with civil society on drug policy' would start in January 2007. In June this year, the Commission asked citizens to act upon a proposal for a dialogue on drug policy (called the Green Paper). But the good intentions remained on paper. Not even a confirmation of receipt has been sent to the people who responded to this request. The dialogue is supposed to start in two months. There is not a single indication of who it will involve nor how it will be organised.

The answer of EU Commissioner Kallas did not leave much to desire in terms of transparency: he said he thought this was bad practice, and promised to ask his colleague of Justice, Franco Frattini, to deal with the issue. Probably, we will have to wait some time still to obtain a response. But it is good to know that the European Commission agrees that the way drug policies are made is violating its own principles.

What ENCOD is trying to establish at the EU level hardly exists at the national level either. It is very rare to hear about citizens being invited to inform politicians about their experiences with drug policies. There are no lobbyists working in parliaments on behalf of drug consumers or other affected citizens. When measures on drugs are being taken, no consultation takes place with the people who are daily confronted with the impact of these measures.

Direct, transparent and continuous communication with the people affected by a problem is a decisive factor in the success of measures that try to reduce that problem. Face to face encounters between the people who are politically responsible and those whose lives are affected by their decisions are indispensable for good policy-making. One encounter can do more than reading a thousand pages.

Such an encounter will take place on November 6th and 7th at the 'Road to Vienna 2008' conference in the European Parliament in Brussels. Several local, regional and national authorities from Europe and beyond will present their need for a wider margin to carry out sensible drug policies, policies that are not based on evidence and not on moral judgements.

Regional drug czar Belén Bilbao of the Basque Country, Spain, will defend the controlled distribution of heroin in prisons. A representative of Bolivian president Evo Morales will present the proposal of his government to end the worldwide prohibition of the coca leaf. Lord Mayor Jan Lonink of the city of Terneuzen, the Netherlands, will explain the proposal of several Dutch cities experiencing a "coffeeshop-tourism" industry to regulate this phenomenon.

All these measures have been initiated by citizens who were prepared to challenge the law and the political consensus in order to improve and save people's lives. Without them, there would be no coffeeshops, no needle exchange, no pill testing, and no coca tea, to mention just a few of such drug policy advances. And in view of the current stagnation in drug policy, without input from these citizen groups, there will be no future progress in the drug policy debate either.

Still citizen initiatives to test the 'transparency' of the cannabis laws are taking place in the Netherlands, where a medical cannabis user was acquitted by the judge for growing cannabis for his own use. In Spain, where the Amigos de Maria (a cannabis consumer group in Vitoria) has started a Cannabis Pharmacy, in order to establish contacts between people who use cannabis for medical reasons and growers who are willing to donate part of their harvest for free. At the end of November, a similar association, Draw Up Your Plant in Antwerp, with among her 35 members one member of the federal parliament, is planning to establish the first cannabis plantation within the framework of Belgian drug policy.

With regards to ENCOD's financial situation things look still difficult, but not hopeless. More members and donors are still necessary in order to cover the needs for this year. But it is sure we will continue. For next year we have good hopes that the situation will improve, if all members continue to give their contribution. We are also preparing various options to find other income sources. Please contact us for more information.

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