

Letter to the editor

Letter in response to John Collins, “Losing UNGASS? Lessons from civil society, past and present” *DAT* Issue 2, 2017

Tom Blickman

Dear editors, as a 20-year veteran of civil society engagement with the United Nations drug control regime, I was pleasantly surprised to see a series of articles on the 2016 UN General Assembly Special Session (UNGASS) on the World Drug Problem in *Drugs and Alcohol Today*, Volume 17, Issue 2. Academia and academic journals have largely ignored the issue – with a few positive exceptions – so I very much welcomed the initiative.

However, my initial enthusiasm disappeared when I read the article by John Collins, “Losing UNGASS? Lessons from civil society, past and present”. I always believed that it was the task of a serious and impartial historian to record and analyse historic events, not to construct a reality that has little or nothing to do with what actually happened or put the author at the centre of the account. Mr Collins proved me wrong. I cannot in this letter point out all the errors and flaws of the article about the UN drug control regime itself, there are simply too many, but will instead concentrate on the inaccurate history of civil society engagement with the 2016 UNGASS.

As a Policy Analyst with the Transnational Institute (TNI), I have been deeply involved with the civil society reform movement since the 1998 UNGASS, and I can assure you that what Mr Collins describes as the two different schools of reform with different strategies, a “realistic” and “idealistic” approach, do not exist. They have been in the same classroom all along with a two-pronged strategy from the beginning.

The history of that modern civil society reform movement started after the experience at the 1998 UNGASS – an event Mr Collins has overlooked completely – in which that movement did not manage to seriously participate. Civil society then consisted of organisations that supported the UN drug control regime and those that called for legalisation without a clear strategy for reform and without engaging with the system itself. Frustrated by that experience and subsequent international meetings, TNI and others decided to initiate a “third way” that consisted of calling for an overhaul of the outdated regime, while advocating for step-by-step pragmatic reforms of the most horrendous aspects of the regime, recognising that the many victims of that regime could not wait until a definitive overhaul would be consolidated.

To that end, informal drug policy dialogues were initiated that brought together reform-minded states, academia and civil society organisations. The first step was to bring in the harm reduction movement, which had ignored the UN drug control regime and the 1998 UNGASS. Over the years, a core group formed that engaged in the ten-year review of the 1998 UNGASS in 2008-2009 – another event Mr Collins completely ignores – and which during the 2016 UNGASS process operated under the name of the Cartagena group; a name coined at an informal dialogue in Cartagena (Colombia) in November 2015[1].

The expanding Cartagena group was a coalition of reform-minded states like Colombia, Mexico, Ghana and Switzerland – to name the leading ones – together with a range of civil society groups, which was one of the main driving forces behind many of the gains in the 2016 UNGASS Outcome Document, and the crucial change towards a public health and human rights-centred approach. This was not a secretive cabal, but a recognised group that openly advocated their goals during the UNGASS process[2].

Although that group had hoped for more progress, they were very much aware that a “collapse of the regime” would not occur and a revision of the UN drug control treaties would not be possible, so that was not included in the public strategy. However, the civil society component of the Cartagena group did consider it appropriate to also advance proposals to start a more fundamental reform of the regime by pointing out that tensions with regime were emerging with the trend towards cannabis legalisation and regulation, which is in clear contravention with the obligations of the UN drug control conventions. In doing so, TNI, for instance, proposed an “expert group” as a possible way out of the emerging conundrum, not only looking at 2016 but

also towards the next moment of international drug control, the 2019 review of the 1998 UNGASS commitments – an event Mr Collins hopefully now is aware of.

This is at least part of the actual history of civil society engagement with the 2016 UNGASS, which Mr Collins completely ignores. He should and could have known this had he just asked the many civil society activists before, during and after UNGASS. Why not, one could ask, and that brings me to the most disappointing aspect of the article.

Mr Collins presents himself as an impartial observer of the process. He is not. Rather, he actively intervened in the strategy debates, advocated following the lead of the USA and what he referred to as the “Brownfield doctrine”, and then lectured reform-oriented civil society for failing to do so. His article is consequently little more than a thinly veiled attempt to justify his position after he was rebuked and his “lessons” politely ignored. When introducing a new movement in civil society thinking, the “Progressive School”, his only supporting reference is to his own work. The school, it would appear, consists basically of just Mr Collins, and Mr Collins alone.

Civil society welcomes an open-minded, honest and accurate account of its interactions with the international drug policy-making field. I am afraid Mr Collins’ contribution does not meet those requirements, despite his affiliation with a reputable institute like the London School of Economics. I sincerely hope future historians will recognise the article for what it is: a hapless self-defence concealed as history.

Sincerely,

Tom Blickman

Notes

1. See International Dialogue on Drug Policies: Supporting the Process Towards UNGASS 2016, Cartagena, Colombia, 22-24 November 2015, available at www.druglawreform.info/en/events/item/6708-supporting-the-process-towards-ungass-2016
2. The report of the Cartagena Dialogue (International Dialogue on Drug Policies) is part of the official documentation of UNGASS 2016, available at www.unodc.org/documents/ungass2016/Contributions/IGO/Carthagena/Carthagena_Dialogue_Report.pdf