

# Setting the scene: International context

1<sup>st</sup> September 2025 Ann Fordham, <u>Executive Director</u>, <u>IDPC</u>



A global grassroots-up movement for reform

 IDPC: Network of 190+ CSOs promoting for drug policies grounded in human rights and social justice

 We are proud to be part of a global movement that that includes communities, experts, and services

 Support Don't Punish Global Day of Action is held on 26 June (World Drug Day). In 2025, events in over 280 cities & 80 countries!

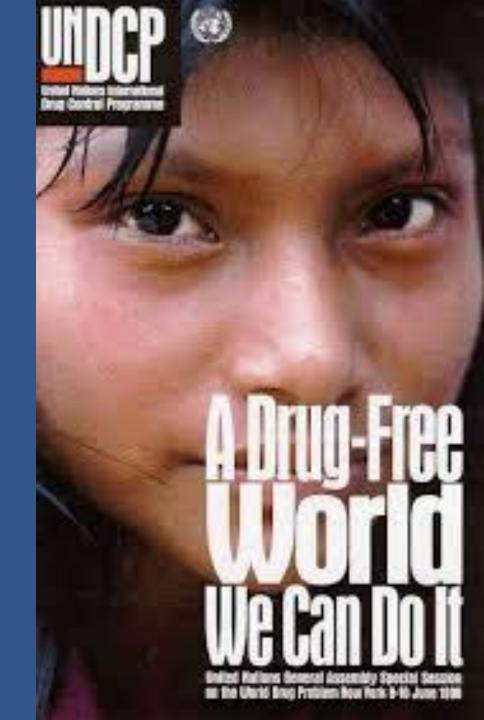




# Why the global context matters

A global regime that exerts huge normative pressure

- 1961 UN Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs
- 1971 UN Convention on Psychotropic Substances
- 1988 UN Convention Against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances
- Almost universally ratified
- Stated objective: to protect the "health and welfare of mankind"
  - Prohibit supply and demand of drugs for nonmedical purposes
  - Promote access for scientific and medical purposes
- VIENNA CONSENSUS





Key figures a

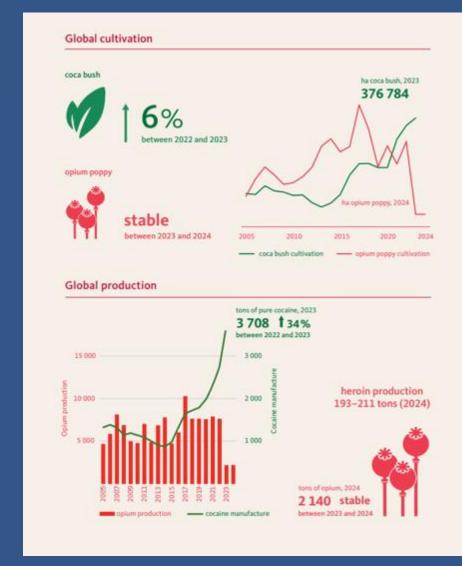
glance, Cultivation

World Drug Report

and Production

2025, UNODC

## An admission of failure







### People who use drugs, 2023

316
million people

128% over 10 years

Source: UNODC, World Drug Report, 2025









cannabis

244

million

opioids

61

amphetamines

31

cocaine

25 million "ecstasy"

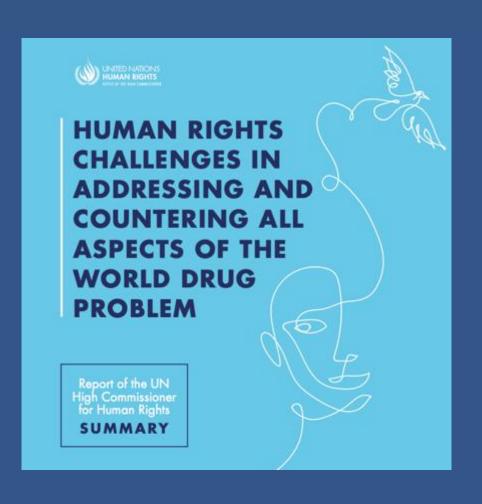
21 million







## Widespread human rights abuses



- Lack of, and unequal access to, harm reduction and drug dependence treatment services
- Mass incarceration
- Militarisation of drug policy
- Disproportionate impacts on women, children and youth, people of African descent, Indigenous Peoples
- Environmental impacts



## A human rights disaster

### Incarceration

1 in 5 prisoners worldwide are incarcerated for drug offences

In some parts of the world, over 80% of women incarcerated are serving sentences for drug-related offences.





### Death penalty

3,113

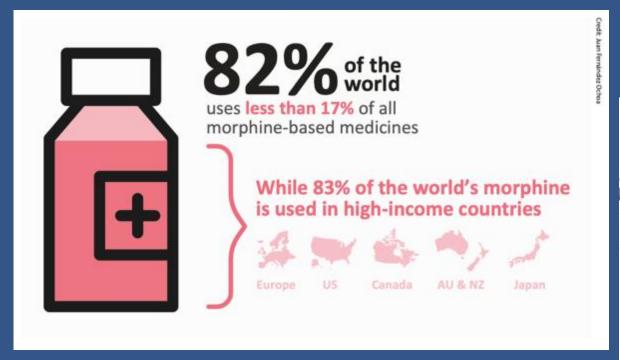
people have been executed for drug offences over the past decade

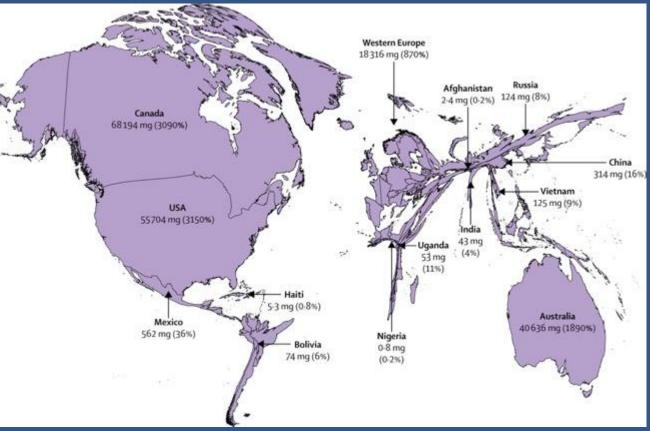
33 jurisdictions retain the death penalty for drug-related crimes





## A crisis of pain...

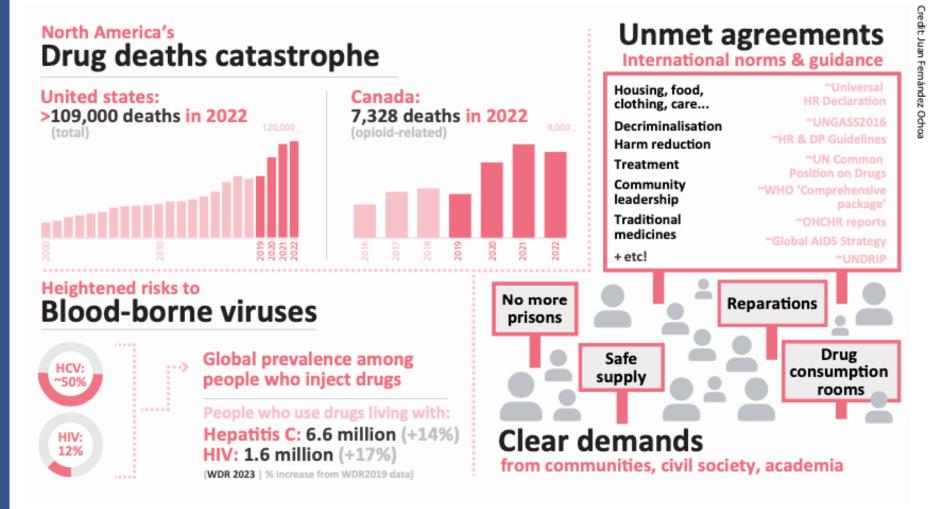








## A deepening crisis of prohibition



Source: 'Off Track', IDPC shadow report, December 2023



## Multiple crises converging

- Global drug control increasingly being recognised as an ineffective system that is not working for many Member States
- US (and other) aid cuts disrupt life-saving health services around the world
- UN funding and values under threat
- Geopolitical disruption reshaping political alliances







# SPENT EVERY YEAR ON THE WAR ON DRUGS





Where are we now?



## Increasing polarisation



 War on drugs vs reforms (decriminalisation, legal regulation)



# Increasing recognition at the UN that the current approach is not working

- 1998: 'A drug-free world, we can do it!'
- 2016: 1<sup>st</sup> time pillars on human rights, health & development added to a high-level political document on drugs
- **2024**: 62 countries call for a review of the UN drug control system





# Increasing involvement of the UN human rights system shifts the discourse

- 2016 UNGASS on drugs: catalyst moment for UN system coherence, momentum has grown ever since
- 2018 UN System Common Position on drugs
- 2023 3<sup>rd</sup> Human Rights Council Resolution passes on drug policy
- Increasing guidance & recommendations from UN human rights system -> General Comment from UN CESCR
- But... Resistance from Vienna-based drug control bodies



UN Common Position on drug policy - Consolidating system-wide coherence

By Martin Jelsma<sup>1</sup>

#### Key points / Executive summary

- Achieving more UN system-wide coherence and alignment with the overarching Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) framework has been a particularly difficult challenge in the area of drug policy.
- From the very start, Member States recognised the risk that discrepancies within the UR system might appear, which was the reason why the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) in 1946 mandated the UR Secretary-General to establish a coordination mechanism.
- Early attempts to strengthen inter-agency collaboration in the 1990s failed, resulting in a Vienna drugs and crime monopoly and a siloed culture that was only broken with the 2016 UN General Assembly Special Session (UNGASS) on drugs.
- Due to the escalation of the 'war on drugs' in the 1990s, UN entities focused on health, human rights, peacebuilding and development distanced themselves from the increasingly controversial drug control agenda and the handening debate in Vienna; or - in the case of the World Health Driganization (WHO) - were arm-wrested into silence.
- The General Assembly provided all UN agencies with a clear mandate, deciding in Resolution 69/201 that the 2016 UROAGS 'shall have an inclusive preparatory process that includes extensive substantive comultations, allowing organs, entities and specialized agencies of the United Nations system, relevant international and regional organtrations, civil society and other netwant stateholdests to fully contribute to the process'.
- The UNGASS process was an opportunity to widen the discussion and include UN entities that

approach the drugs issue from health, sustainable development, human rights, and peacebuilding perspectives, and to promote UN system-wide coherence with respect to global drug control strategies.

- The UN System Common Position on drug policy, adopted in November 2018 by the UN System Chief Executives Board for Coordination (CER), commits to "supporting Member States in developing and implementing truly balanced, comprehensive, integrated, evidence-based, human rights-based, development-oriented, and sustainable responses to the world drug problem, within the framework of the 2030 Agend for Sustainable Development.
- The Common Position is based on a strong mandate given by the General Assentibly to the CEB and the Secretary-General to improve UN system-wide coherence, and incorporates many elements from the 2016 UNGASS, the SDG framework and human rights instruments that have all been adopted by Member States.
- The Vienna consensus is broken, tentions are on the rise and contradictions are becoming more apparent between certain drug control practices and the overarching aims of health promotion, social justice, sustainable development, human rights protection and peacebuilding – some of which are rooted in incompatible objectives between the UN drug control system and the UN human rights regime.
- The UN Common Position and the Task Team are hard-won achievements that provide unprecedented authoritative guidance for UN entities and can help guide the current international drug control system into the 21st century, on the ground through the new resident coordinator system and at global level to overcome the sliced approach.

1



"The 'war on drugs' may be understood to a significant extent as a war on people. Its impact has been greatest on those who live in poverty, and it frequently overlaps with discrimination directed at marginalised groups, minorities and Indigenous Peoples"

+20 UN human rights expert on World Drug Day 2023



# Global support for Ending Criminal Sanctions for Personal Possession / Use DECRIMINALISATION







**UNITED NATIONS** 

**HUMAN RIGHTS** 

















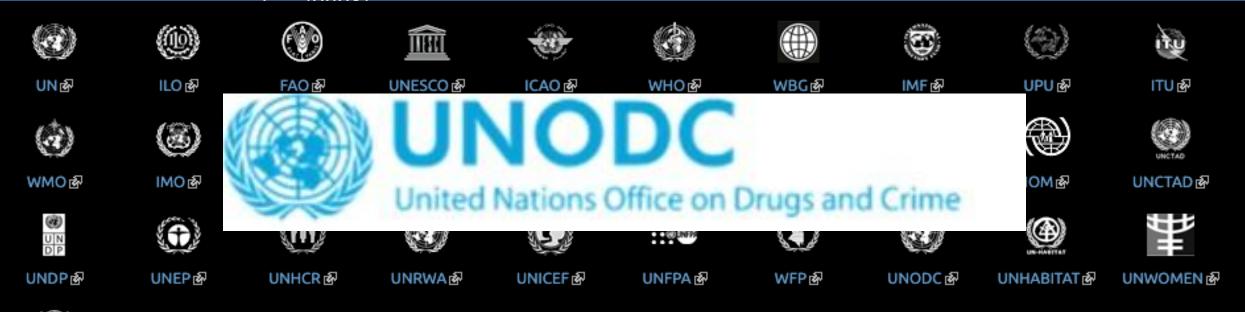






## **UN support for decriminalisation**

- UN System Common Positions
  - on drugs (2018)





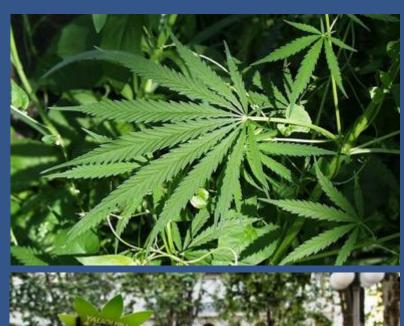
UN Chief Executives Board (CEB) made up of 31 UN entities support the UN Common Position on drugs



# Reasons to be hopeful...

## 2020: CANNABIS 'RE-SCHEDULED'

- WHO ECDD performed "critical review"
- Recommended to take cannabis out of Schedule IV (1961)
- CND voted in favour (just!)
- Acknowledges "medical value" of cannabis
- (More than 500 million people now live in places that have / or are planning legally regulated markets)







# **Progress on harm reduction**

## 2024: CND ADOPTS 'HARM REDUCTION'

- US resolution on opioid overdose crisis
- Russia called for a vote and lost (38 v 2)
- 108 countries support harm reduction in national policy
- 93 countries have needle and syringe programmes
- 94 countries have opioid agonist therapy
- 18 countries have drug consumption rooms
- Yet still widely opposed, and drastically underfunded

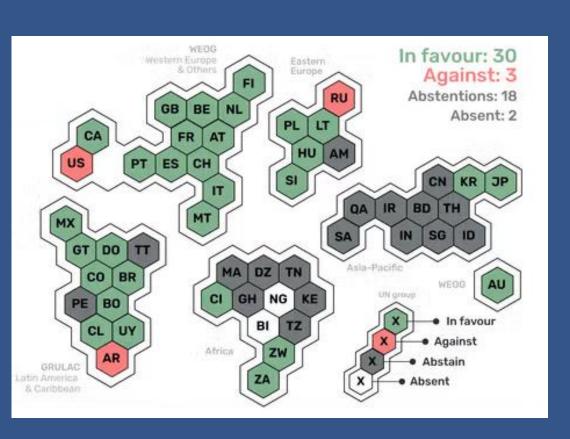






# Challenges to the UN regime

### 2025: NEW 'INDEPENDENT PANEL OF EXPERTS' CREATED



- Political shifts in USA impact the CND
- Resolution tabled by Colombia proposes an independent review of the "drug control machinery"
- Adopted with support across regions, including traditionally conservative countries
- Only USA, Russia and Argentina oppose



# Challenges to the UN regime

### **2026: COCA LEAF**

- Prohibition termed "a historical wrong" in conflict with Indigenous rights
- Review by WHO, with decision / vote at CND
- Role of Ireland remove objection & EU position



## 2026/27: PANEL REVIEW & RECOMMENDATIONS

- Final report due March 2027
- Opportunity to properly review and critique a broken system
- In context of wider UN reviews and reforms too UN80



# Human rights...

- So much progress in past decade – HRC & General Assembly
- Indigenous rights is the next frontier for this fight
- But UN human rights regime is in crisis – Ukraine & Gaza
- New resolution at HRC to strengthen OHCHR mandate





## Future is unwritten

- IDPC will continue to strive for social justice & human rights
- We will continue to challenge punitive & repressive drug policies that have failed
- Deep political uncertainty... But nothing is inevitable
- Believe in the power of movements to ignite change



