

Honorable Chair,
Excellences,
Ladies and Gentlemen,
Dear colleagues and friends,

It is my privilege to address you today as Chair of the Vienna NGO Committee on Drugs (VNGOC) on the occasion of the International Day against Drug Abuse and Illicit Trafficking. As you may know, we are a global membership organization, comprising over 200 civil society members and we have been active in the field of drug policies for over three decades.

The theme of this year’s International Day against Drug Abuse and Illicit Trafficking – “Listen First - Listening to children and youth is the first step to help them grow healthy and safe” – reminds us all of the need to pay more attention to the voices of children and youth in our communities, including those who use drugs or experience harms as a result of drug use.

The VNGOC’s intention is to attend to the needs of affected populations — those populations affected both by problematic drug use, violence, and harmful policies. Children and youth are an affected population. Attending to their voices as they articulate their own needs for healthy safe environments aligns our membership with VNGOC’s commitment to implement the practical recommendations of the UNGASS Outcome Document.

The perspective of youth is always enlightening and refreshing, helping us to see old problems in new ways. Youth are the “both/and” constituency, calling for evidence-based treatment, harm reduction and prevention. Articles 12 and 13 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child grant young people freedom of expression, the right to be heard and have their views taken into account. Article 33 in the same Convention strongly calls for the protection of children from the illicit use of narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances as defined in relevant international treaties, and preventing the use of children in the illicit production and trafficking of such substances. ***The Committee on the Rights of the Child has also acknowledged that this includes the protection of young people through evidence-based prevention, harm reduction and dependence services. The committee welcomes alternatives to punitive or repressive drug control policies in relation to adolescents***

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According with the report Violence, Children, and Organized Crime, recently published by the Inter-American Commission of Human Rights, adolescents and children from marginalized areas have suffered the influence of organized crime and violence associated with the illegal drug markets. State responses to these challenges are primarily based on security forces and punitive repression through the criminal justice system, primarily focusing on young men and adolescents. In some cases, this adds to excessive use of force; cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment, even extrajudicial executions and forced disappearances.

Across the regions, the high rates of arbitrary detentions of young people for violation of drug laws is also concerning. Adolescents who are poor, or members of minorities are overrepresented among those killed or detained.

Protecting children and youth from illicit drug is a huge challenge in the 21st century.

Smart and comprehensive prevention and supply control strategies seek to protect youth both from substance use, and from harmful policies that foster violent neighborhoods, schools, and imprisonment of children themselves. We know that the health and wellbeing of hundreds of thousands of children and youth in the traditional producer countries is threatened by violent drug markets that feed mostly the consumer habits of the global north.

We know that millions of children globally have one or more parents incarcerated for drug related offenses. UN Special Procedures have recognized the increasing number of women incarcerated under anti-drugs laws. The majority are mothers and sole caretakers of their children. The impacts of this incarceration on children (both those growing up in prison and those left outside with family members, in foster homes or other institutions) are lifelong.

It is well documented that children living with parents with substance use disorders, as well as parental incarceration can result in childhood traumas, affecting children's mental and physical health and wellbeing.

Last year's successful UNGASS gives us the opportunity to put people and public health at the heart of drug policies, and to align those drug policies with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. This Agenda calls on member states to leave no one, including children and youth, behind.

Listening to children and youth means giving them a seat at the table, allowing them to speak on their own behalf and not speaking for them.

Thank you for your kind attention and wish you a relaxing summer ahead.