

## **VNGOC Statement for CND Special Event**

26th June 2019, Jamie Bridge (Chairperson)

*Check against delivery.*

Thank you, Mr Chair, for inviting me to speak today on behalf of the Vienna NGO Committee on Drugs.

I want to start by expressing solidarity with all of those fighting against inequalities around the world – we are listening, we are learning, and we stand firmly against racism in all of its many forms.

We are also listening and learning when it comes to the COVID-19 pandemic – and how quickly frontline workers have adapted to the new situation. I want to pay tribute to the vital role that civil society has played, and how NGOs around the world have worked tirelessly and fearlessly to continue delivering essential prevention, harm reduction, treatment, rehabilitation and advocacy services for those in need.

There have been many commendable changes in policy and practice in response to this global emergency. Innovations such as virtual consultations, peer-led outreach and support to reduce harm and aid recovery, more flexible treatment models, providing shelter to the homeless, combined HIV and COVID-19 testing for people who use drugs, and releasing hundreds of thousands of incarcerated people across all regions of the world – including many in pre-trial detention or sentenced for non-violent drug offences.

But there have also been negative responses. Pandemics exacerbate or feed upon existing inequalities, poverty and vulnerability. We have seen law enforcement abuses in the name of public health, service closures, essential funding being diverted away from NGOs, and vulnerable people being demonised because they cannot comply with lockdown measures. The impacts of all of this on health, mental health and substance use are likely to be significant.

We can only overcome this pandemic and its impact on drugs if we leave no-one behind and focus on human rights, on addressing the inequalities that exist throughout modern society, and on collaborations with NGOs. To quote the recent statement from the ‘Conference of NGOs in Consultative Relationship with the United Nations’, we can “emerge from this crisis and build a better world”. This is an opportunity to meaningfully and tangibly deliver on the countless commitments that member states have made to adopt truly balanced and comprehensive drugs responses that emphasise inclusiveness, public health and rights. COVID-19 cannot be an excuse to back-track on these commitments.

For the CND itself, important discussions have had to shift to virtual platforms – including this one today. We welcome the inclusion of civil society voices today and in the intersessionals, but note with regret that NGOs observers are locked out of the new “Topical

Meetings” on cannabis and related substances, where our expertise would be of value.

The World Drug Report, launched and presented this week, is a testament to the hard work of Angela Me and her team. Yet it once again demonstrates how much still needs to be done to more effectively address the world drug situation. The data show that drug use has increased globally, production and supply continues unabated, and the responses remain underfunded and inadequate. More needs to also be said about the impact of drug control on human rights and racial inequality.

Civil society is a driving force for addressing these issues. As the Vienna NGO Committee on drugs, we urge all member states to acknowledge, support and empower civil society in all its shapes and forms. Even when our messages may be critical and challenging, we are part of the solution.

Thank you for your attention.