CND special event to commemorate the World Day Against Drug Abuse and Illicit Trafficking, and launching the World Drug Report 2022
28 June 2022

Remarks by Sylvia Kay, Transnational Institute (TNI)

Thank you very much to the Vienna NGO Committee for inviting me to be part of the panel. It is an honour to be part of today’s discussion to mark the World Drug Day and to launch the 2022 World Drug Report.

In my intervention, I want to focus on a particular novel aspect of this year’s World Drug Report – namely Special Booklet number 5 which examines the connections between drugs and the environment.

I want to firstly commend all of those involved in the production of this Special Booklet and encourage all of you to read it: it is data rich, comprehensive, and makes a significant advance in the debate.

In the short time I have for my intervention, I will hone in on a few key points that the Special Booklet makes, with additional insights from a report that the Transnational Institute is launching today, entitled ‘Prohibited Plants. Environmental Justice in Drug Policy’.

The first key point is around the scale and scope of environmental harm. The Special Booklet accurately notes that illicit drugs are not the main drivers of environmental destruction worldwide. However, this does not mean that local and individual impacts cannot be significant. For this reason, as the Special Booklet argues, it is key that in drug policy responses, the principle of ‘do no harm’ should serve as a minimum baseline approach. This is important as we have at times seen harmful crop-substitution projects involving highly destructive industrial, mono-culture plantations cast as alternative development. These types of projects should not qualify for public funding and support.

The Special Booklet is, arguably, more cautious regarding the environmental impacts of other supply side measures such as eradication, interdiction, or more stringent pre-cursor controls. Here I would argue, it is equally critical that an ‘environmental harm reduction approach’ is applied which means that any supply side interventions must be assessed against the direct and indirect environmental harms that they can cause.

The second key point is around the transition to regulated markets in relation to cannabis. As the Special Booklet notes, legal regulation gives authorities better opportunities to introduce environmental safeguards, compliance and monitoring mechanisms as compared to illicit, underground markets.

TNI shares the concern however about the high carbon footprint associated with indoor cannabis cultivation. As the Booklet notes, the greenhouse gas emissions of cannabis cultivated indoors are 900 to 3,600 times higher than those of indoor-cultivated energy-intensive food crops. Outdoor cultivation, meanwhile, can reduce the carbon footprint of cannabis by up to 96 per cent.
These findings are highly relevant for countries to take on board in the design of their cannabis markets, including in this week’s hearings in Germany that will take place. From an environmental as well as development point of view, significant benefit can accrue from sourcing cannabis from traditional producing countries in the global South which engage almost exclusively in outdoor growing.

The third and final point, I wish to make is around forward-thinking sustainability pathways. It is excellent that the Booklet makes mention of approaches such as agroecology and community-based resource management as ways in which drug policy can also pro-actively contribute to environmental protection and conservation. It will be important that these approaches receive the full public support and investment that they require.

Thank you for your attention and congratulations again on the launch of the 2022 World Drug Report which marks an important and historic milestone in connecting the dots between drug policy and the environment.