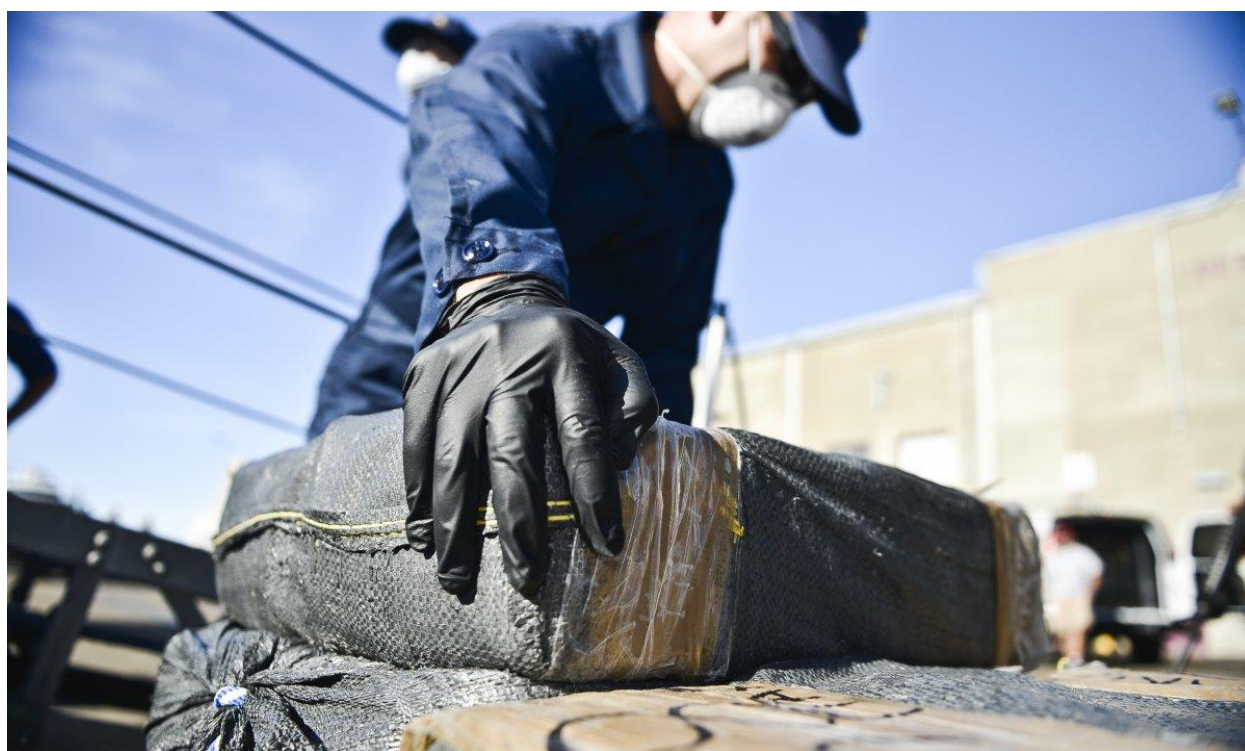


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High and Dry: The UN risks being left behind by the turning tide of global drug policy

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U.S. Coast Guard | Luke Pinneo

When the UK's Conservative government [decided in late July to relax restrictions on doctors prescribing cannabis-based medicines](#), it joined a rapidly growing list of countries turning away from the heavy-handed supply-reduction approach that has long dominated global drug control efforts. While the tide is shifting rapidly on global drugs policy, the United Nations – [paralyzed by conflicting demands](#) of Member States – risks being left behind.

In March 2019, Ministers from around the world will gather in Vienna to review progress against five drug control targets [set ten years before](#). On most of their measures, there has been little progress, often quite the reverse. The UN's own [2018 World Drug Report](#) concludes that opium

and coca plant production are in fact at record highs. After more than 60 years of implementing a supply-reduction approach, it is hard to conclude that there are many indicators of success.

It is no accident, then, that the tide is turning against supply-reduction policies in an increasing number of countries. A growing group of governments is instead pushing for an approach that emphasizes public health, harm reduction and humane treatment of drug users.

UN Secretary-General António Guterres was a pioneer of this approach when he was Prime Minister of Portugal. Since it decriminalized all drugs in 2001 and moved to a [health-centred approach](#), Portugal has in fact seen [dramatic drops in overdoses, HIV infection and drug-related crime](#).

The reformist trend in other countries has grown across the world, with countries from Colombia to Turkey, and from Macedonia to the Philippines now allowing prescription of some cannabis-based medicines. The World Health Organization recently [concluded](#) that this approach is based on sound scientific and medical evidence.

Several jurisdictions, including Canada, Jamaica, Uruguay and some US states, are going even further, having legalized the production and distribution of cannabis. Polls suggest [60% of Americans now support federal legalization](#). The global cannabis market is worth [more than USD 30 billion](#), and a growing international cannabis trade is increasingly dominated by major commercial interests.

Despite growing calls for policy change at the UN, progress is stymied by the tradition of consensus decision-making. This is compounded by the fact that the decades-long War on Drugs has offered a powerful vehicle for security cooperation with client states around the world, producing predictable but perverse results for human rights.

This failed war served to normalize the adoption of iron-fist military and penal approaches to drug use and trafficking across Latin America, contributing to an explosion of organized crime, urban violence and irregular migration to the US. The supply-reduction approach normalized the adoption of the death penalty for drug-related offences worldwide, which endures even today in [thirty-two jurisdictions](#). Human Rights Watch claims [over 12,000 people have died in the Philippines' "drug war"](#), and that sinister model may be [spreading](#). And there is evidence that the approach contributes to cyclical poverty and poor health outcomes, environmental harms, gender discrimination and high levels of police-community violence and mistrust.

At the UN, the response has been fragmented. Meeting to discuss criminal justice policy in Vienna, states continue to emphasize supply-reduction goals. Meeting in Geneva, the same states call for drug control policies to respect human rights. Meeting in New York, their representatives emphasize sustainable development objectives and draw attention to the links between [terrorist groups and drug trafficking](#).

When they gather in Vienna in March, Ministers may be tempted to reproduce the diplomatic boilerplate that asserts that all these objectives can be achieved at once. A growing group of states no longer buys that argument, instead concluding that an over-emphasis on supply reduction places all the other objectives, including public health and human rights, at risk.

Faced with signs of an emerging schism, the position of the Secretary-General is not an enviable one. The UN system could, however, help to recast the very terms of its own member states' debate. It could shifting attention from whether a country is for or against supply-reduction to a much more practical question: what is the best domestic policy mix for achieving the diverse goals of the global drug control regime?

To provide states the answers to that question, the UN system would need to do two things it cannot and does not do now.

First, it would need to be able to tell states which domestic policy mixes work under which circumstances – including whether cannabis legalization is working. The orthodox approach to the drug control regime prevents the UN, and researchers, studying this. The UN system could encourage states to use the March 2019 meeting to authorize steps facilitating scientific study of the cannabis trade and its impacts, including establishment of a panel mixing government and academic expertise to review the emerging scientific literature, modelled on the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.

Second, the UN system would need to be able offer Member States know-how, advice, support, and scientific monitoring and evaluation services as states adjust their own domestic policy frameworks to pursue a more health-centred approach, responding to shifts in the science of 'what works'. Such advisory and support services could be an attractive offering from the UN development system to many UN member states – at very different national income levels. Again, the UN system could use the March 2019 meeting to seek a mandate for such an approach from Member States.

[Multilateral systems and policy regimes generally do not disappear overnight](#), but rather decay as they fail to keep pace with shifting attitudes around them. On drug policy, the UN now faces just such a sea-change. It can use the March 2019 meeting to adjust its rig and sail forward, or stand by and risk being left high and dry.



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