IDPC STATEMENT

I am making this statement on behalf of the International Drug Policy Consortium and on behalf of a further 194 civil society organisations and networks that signed a civil society statement released yesterday towards the UNGASS process.

Before starting, I would like to clarify this statement is not produced by, nor endorsed by the Civil Society Task Force for the UNGASS. Although we very much support the important work of the Task Force and our collective mission is to ensure a comprehensive, structured, meaningful and balanced participation of civil society during the preparatory process for the UNGASS. We understand that it is not what divides us, but what brings us together – the genuine concern for the health and welfare of humankind – that matters. As such, as a member of the Civil Society Task Force for the UNGASS, IDPC will continue engaging in an open, respectful and constructive manner in the dialogue on addressing the world drug problem.

As we heard from many member states the UNGASS is a critical opportunity for an honest assessment of what is, and what is not, working in global drug control. Towards this end we would like to express our serious concern regarding the preparations so far and also on the draft Outcome Document.

To date the UNGASS process has failed to recognise the lack of progress achieved by international drug control and to acknowledge the damage caused in terms of human rights violations, health harms, violence, corruption and billions of dollars of public money wasted on drug policies that have not worked to reduce the size of the illicit drug market. The UN Secretary General called on member states to have the broadest debate possible and consider “all options”. It is therefore not acceptable to simply reaffirm the current approach and to claim that “tangible and measurable progress” has been achieved, while there is no explanation of what progress this refers to.

If the UNGASS outcome does not engage in meaningful critique, new ideas or language, it is at risk of becoming an expensive restatement of previous agreements that does not sufficiently move the debate forward or reflect the changing realities on the ground. This would represent a major failing for the General Assembly – and serious disappointment for the member states, UN agencies, civil society, and public who have demanded so much more.

If the global drug problem requires a global response with international cooperation, it is crucial that the solutions are found with in as an inclusive way as possible. But in terms of the preparatory process for UNGASS, many member states particularly from the global south have been largely unable to participate in the negotiations because they do not have permanent representation in Vienna. The negotiations have mostly taken place in closed informal meetings – which also excludes civil society observers, and contributes to the lack of transparency.

In terms of the draft outcome document, at present there are still very few ‘action-oriented’ operational recommendations to address the countless challenges that remain.. Member states should consider forward-looking proposals that will support a meaningful and progressive debate in the lead up to the next big moment in international drug control in 2019 – when the current Political Declaration and Action Plan comes to an end.

The current draft is also not a balanced reflection of the formal UNGASS submissions made by UN agencies, the Civil Society Task Force and NGOs, member states and regional groups. Many of these submissions explicitly call for ending the criminalisation of people who use drugs, and for the abolition of the death penalty, but these points are not yet included. In addition, the draft is not consistent with the priorities identified in the Sustainable Development Goals, such as tackling poverty, gender inequality, violence and environmental degradation.

Finally, despite explicit acknowledgement of the term “harm reduction” by the General Assembly, there is no acknowledgement of the need for a harm reduction response to drug use in the current
draft.. This is despite the fact that multiple countries have called for explicit recognition of harm reduction.

To conclude, we call on member states to take account of the shifting realities on the ground and be forward looking in their deliberations. The UNGASS is a unique opportunity to take a stand and demonstrate leadership for drug policy reform towards the wider objectives of the UN system – human rights, public health, peace and development.