



*Expert Workshop
on
Supply-Oriented
Harm Reduction
May 10, 2011*



The Expert Workshop on Supply-Oriented Harm Reduction, co-hosted by the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA) and the Transnational Institute (TNI), took place on May 10, 2011, in Washington, D.C. The workshop was intended to provide a space for an open-minded exchange among experts from a variety of disciplines and countries. Funded by the Open Society Foundations, it brought together a small group of academics and NGO experts from Brazil, Mexico, Colombia, the United States, and the Netherlands to explore the application of harm reduction strategies to supply-side drug control efforts. John Walsh (WOLA) was the principle organizer of the event; Eric Olson served as facilitator and Coletta Youngers as rapporteur.

The long-running war on drugs is coming under increasing criticism, with debates underway in many quarters over how to make the global drug control system more “fit for purpose” of promoting human welfare. Interventions and policies aiming to reduce the health, social, and economic harms of drug use have become prominent in many countries in recent years. By comparison, consideration of how a harm reduction approach might be applied to supply-oriented challenges is relatively new.

The need for fresh approaches is clear enough. For mass-market drugs such as cocaine, heroin, and cannabis, traditional enforcement-led policies appear virtually powerless to achieve their aims. At the same time, traditional policies fail to address—and may exacerbate—problems such as violence and citizen insecurity, corruption, human rights abuses, and escalating incarceration rates.

The workshop sought to address the question: Can the concept of harm reduction, broadly construed, be applied to supply-oriented challenges to better address the harms associated with illicit drug production and distribution, but also minimize the harms that stem from drug control itself? Workshop organizers started from the premise that serious consideration of harm reduction’s potential can inform the growing debate and help identify promising alternatives to the drug war status quo.

The facilitated discussion was organized around three major topics—research, policy, and networks—with each session initiated by brief remarks to frame the issues and stimulate debate. Relevant articles were circulated to all participants prior to the workshop to promote a more informed discussion. (The annex provides an updated list of suggested readings on the topic.) The discussion was held under Chatham House Rule to ensure confidentiality and allow for a free exchange of ideas. Hence, no individuals

are quoted in this report. The report aims to present the ideas and discussions which took place at the workshop; it does not present consensus positions or endorsement by those participating.

The workshop was intended to be the beginning of a collaborative effort to harness the potential of supply-oriented harm reduction. These proceedings are intended to help provide a foundation upon which future discussions and debate can be built.

Session I: The Research Agenda

John Walsh and Martin Jelsma (TNI) opened the workshop and introduced Eric Olson, explaining his role as to facilitate brainstorming. Olson reiterated the intended nature of the discussion: to think big, think “outside the box,” and wrestle with new ideas. Participants were encouraged to take risks in presenting their views.

Conference organizers proposed a series of questions to advancing the state-of-the-art in applying harm reduction approaches to supply-oriented challenges:

- What are the conceptual and empirical strengths and weaknesses of the case for applying harm reduction to supply-oriented policy?
- What specific harms associated with illicit drug production, distribution and drug control policies themselves can be identified and measured?
- What are the most severe harms that stem from policy *per se*, and who bears brunt of these policy-generated harms?
- What difference do varied local, national, and institutional settings make?
- How would a harm reduction framework re-define policy goals and shape performance measurement indicators?
- How would re-cast goals and performance indicators affect agencies’ incentives and priorities?
- Are there examples of supply-oriented harm reduction in practice (whether or not under the “harm reduction” banner)?
- What does harm reduction look like for sets of discrete, supply-oriented challenges: for example, crop cultivation and alternative livelihoods strategies, wholesale distribution, and retail distribution?

The facilitator also pointed to the need to think about what is being neglected in the research. What are new areas for research and action? What are the areas that need to be filled in or included? He also stressed the importance of thinking about the potential problems that could be generated by a harm reduction approach. If the goal is to reduce harm, then researchers need to think about the harms that could potentially be reduced by applying such an approach to supply-side drug control efforts.

Opening Remarks

The first presenter described a research effort undertaken with another academic to develop and apply a framework to identify and evaluate specific harms associated with illicit drug production, distribution, and controls. They began this effort after prior research led them to conclude that supply-reduction policies cannot meaningfully reduce the aggregate supply of drugs and might also entail substantial economic, political, and social costs, thus, begging the questions as to why and what might work better. The present supply-control system is broken for at least two reasons. The first has to do with the so-called “balloon effect.” As long as there is robust demand, there will be supply. If supply is reduced in one location, it will eventually emerge in another. Second, in focusing on the supply of drugs, in isolation from everything else, it misses the bigger picture. Such an approach does not take into account how the market works and how it relates to corruption and violence or to environmental and health concerns.

Amartya Sen once asked, “Why must we reject being vaguely right in favor of being precisely wrong”?¹ In the case of drug policy, we often opt for precisely wrong. We can measure hectares of drug-linked crops, but what does that tell us? We tend to latch on to what can be measured; it appears to be human nature.

In contrast, a harm reduction approach offers the potential to move away from a focus on hectares, tonnage, grams, arrests and the like to think more broadly about what is going on in the world. Such an approach can still be applied badly if it is not thought through carefully, but it offers the potential for breadth across policy communities and across measures and indicators. It also offers the potential for analytical rigor, with “full accounting.” The presenter cautioned that, in undertaking a harm reduction approach, unintended consequences should not be the only focus. While thinking about unintended consequences represents a significant step forward, one also needs to look at the direct impact of policies and what those policies are intended to achieve. Both the positives and the negatives must be assessed. Finally, this approach can provide a more solid evidence base for policy making.

Applying a harm reduction approach also has potential conceptual and technical weaknesses. A key weakness has to do with vocabulary. Despite the large number of

¹ Sen, Amartya, John Muellbauer, and Geoffrey Hawthorn. 1987. *The standard of living*. Cambridge [Cambridgeshire]: Cambridge University Press. 34.

academic papers seeking clarity on what harm reduction means, it continues to have different meanings for different individuals.² Various methodological issues were also discussed, including subjectivity, quantification, and incommensurability. Some amount of subjectivity may be unavoidable, but there are alternatives to quantification. From both an academic and policy-oriented point of view, one must be concrete, but not necessarily to the exclusion of phenomena that are not quantifiable. If we exclude them, we de facto deem them “valueless” no matter their societal importance. Making comparisons across harms and societies, in view of cultural differences, also presents challenges. Finally, harm reduction itself has become highly politicized. For many people, particularly in the United States, harm reduction is seen as a codeword for drug legalization. Academics can try to avoid the politicization of the term, but ultimately, must deal with it.

The first presenter, outlining the aforementioned framework, then described a harm assessment process which involves identifying possible harms and bearers of harm, rating the severity and incidence of harm, and, on the basis of those ratings, establishing policy priorities. Another step of the process addresses “causality”; that is, it seeks to determine and distinguish between the proximate and underlying causes of harm. Is the harm caused by the activity itself, by the policy, or by both? That step is necessary in order to think concretely about how to improve policies. The presenter acknowledged that many difficult issues have emerged as they—the presenter and the presenter’s research partner—have applied this framework to increasingly challenging environments, starting with a relatively simple application to cocaine trafficking in Belgium. For example, in evaluating incidence or frequency one might ask: At what point does a particular activity become problematic? Each time the framework is applied to a new situation, new analytical challenges emerge. Nonetheless, supply-oriented harm reduction provides a unified approach for re-defining policy goals and shaping performance indicators.

The next presenter began by taking up the vocabulary issue, noting that in fact debate continues as to the very definition of the term “harm reduction.” Regardless, harm reduction should not be defined as a label or a program, but as a criterion for evaluating programs and policies. In simple terms, in making policy choices, one wants to mitigate the adverse negative consequences of drug use and distribution. A harm reduction approach provides a way of taking into account all consequences of a given policy; it is a way to assess policies. In short, though it has a complicated historical origin, harm reduction is not a complicated conceptual issue.

² One widely used definition of harm reduction is that put forward by Harm Reduction International (formerly known as the International Harm Reduction Association): “Harm reduction refers to policies, programmes, and practices that aim to primarily reduce the adverse health, social, and economic consequences of the use of legal and illegal psychoactive drugs without necessarily reducing drug consumption.”

Normally, harm reduction is thought of in terms of drug use and particularly injecting drug use; however, it is a much broader concept and can be applied to other areas of drug control, including source-country efforts. Ways in which supply reduction can reduce harm include: 1) reducing total drug use; 2) reducing the harm drug users cause to themselves and others; and 3) reducing the harm caused by drug markets and distribution networks. The idea—and this does come from the historical origins of the term—is to focus on the harms themselves rather than the quantities of drugs produced or consumed. Such harms to be assessed include those caused by the violence of drug traffickers, public disorder, corruption, and environmental damage. For example, if environmental damage is a primary concern, then policy makers can take action to address that without necessarily reducing overall supply.

In the United States, police have been somewhat effective in trying to close public markets, in a way that has nothing to do with decreasing the availability of drugs. They have reduced specific harms—harms that the police take seriously as they negatively impact their work and their public image. For example, police in Tampa, Florida, succeeded in closing a particular drug market when they discovered that playing Mozart in the park proved to be a real turn-off for drug users. Indeed, there are a variety of approaches labeled “focused deterrence,” such as the Boston Gun Project and efforts in High Point, North Carolina, which focus on decreasing the harms related to drug distribution without intending to affect overall drug use. Another example is community-generated “most wanted” lists, where police focus on the dealers perceived as most troubling for the local community. In short, a variety of “plain vanilla” policing efforts fall under the harm reduction label and are useful additions to the inventory of efforts that should be promoted as effective harm reduction.

The harm reduction approach can also be applied to source-country efforts. Once the notion of the “balloon effect” has been accepted, then one can evaluate whether moving production—which is really all that can be achieved—is itself a good thing. At least in the case of coca, planting itself can be harmful. Moving the activity around increases deforestation rates and probably has other negative environmental consequences. Looking at coca control efforts from this perspective provides a very different point of view for considering the utility of that kind of activity.

A source-country, Colombia, was the focus of the final speaker, who presented research on efforts to measure the costs and efficiency of drug policies under Plan Colombia. Investigators focused on what works, what does not, and at what cost, and then did a ranking of what works best at what cost. Three drug control policies were analyzed: aerial herbicide spraying (“fumigation”) and manual crop eradication campaigns; interdiction; and alternative development efforts.

Fumigation and manual eradication campaigns are not only problematic in terms of who is being targeted, but also in terms of economic efficiency. Both fumigation and manual eradication target the weakest link in the trafficking chain, as coca cultivation produces

only about nine percent of the value-added of the cocaine market in Colombia; the amount of money produced in Colombia from coca production is a miniscule amount of its GDP. Eradication campaigns provoke significant social protest in some of the poorest areas of the country and yet have not had the desired impact in limiting supply; they are the least economically efficient drug control strategy. Eradication simply moves crops around. This is at least in part because drug traffickers have developed all sorts of strategic responses to the spraying campaigns.

Interdiction, broadly understood, targets much more important links in the production chain. The research shows interdiction to be three to four times more cost-efficient than eradication. The statistics on hectares eradicated, drug seizures and the like over the last three years indicate a significant increase in interdiction and a decrease in eradication efforts in that country. In other words, Colombia is moving in the right direction in prioritizing drug control activities.

Although alternative development looks great in theory, it has not worked in practice. Its marginal cost is the highest of the three. The presenter, however, highlighted an important caveat: Alternative development programs have been poorly implemented in Colombia. In particular, coordination between different government agencies—essential to good results—has been sorely lacking. Hence, it is not clear if the research results show that these programs have not worked because the approach itself is wrong or if it is because alternative development has been carried out poorly.

Another study was then undertaken of the Macarena Integral Consolidation Plan (*Plan de Consolidación Integral de la Macarena*), comparing it to a control group of five or six municipalities that are the most similar to the Macarena region. Researchers compared socioeconomic indicators, levels of violence, and coca production before and after the Plan began. The research shows that the effort is starting to show results including improved access to justice, decreased coca cultivation, increased state presence, improved security conditions, and increased access to credit, though not for small farmers. He concluded that the more balanced approach in Macarena shows that positive results can be obtained.

Finally, the presenter pointed out that the research shows that there does not seem to be a tradeoff between economic efficiency and harm reduction, which should be the starting point of any policy debate about harm reduction. The question is how to convince policy makers that there is no such tradeoff in drug producing countries. For that, more empirical research is needed.

Discussion

Picking up on the final presentation, one participant noted that the advantage of the harm reduction approach is that it moves beyond the routine numbers game—number of hectares eradicated, quantities of drugs, seized, etc.—and allows policy makers to

focus on other issues such as the environment and health. In that sense, the risk of a purely economic analysis is that a great deal of socially important information could be cast aside. The psychological impact of policies is also important and researchers should not just look at the impact that can be reduced to economic costs. Nonetheless, economic analysis can provide a powerful argument in favor of a harm reduction approach. It is just one contribution to the debate. In the end, inputs, outputs, and collateral damage must all be measured.

Another issue is that understanding what constitutes harm tends to be very complex, as there are a whole host of harms that policy makers might attempt to control. How are these prioritized so that policy makers do not end up having hundreds of performance indicators related to those harms? Later in the discussion, one participant also stated that not everyone has the same concept of what constitutes harm, and even if agreement exists, the factors that most influence the harms are governance conditions, not just drug policies themselves.

Much of the debate centered on the political complexities of a harm reduction approach. One example provided is the impact of coca cultivation on the environment. One group did a study of the environmental impact of coca production and developed a proposal for environmentally sustainable coca production, which primarily implied a change in the use of pesticides and chemicals. The amount of funding needed to implement a pilot project was only 50,000 Euros, but neither the government nor funders would consider it, in part because the project would have supported an illicit activity, undertaken by actors operating outside the influence of or in direct opposition to the government. Yet the proposal suggested an opportunity to reduce the environmental harm caused by coca cultivation.

Another fundamental challenge is that policies need to be evaluated at a very local level. This is particularly hard for U.S. policies, which are often defined in Washington. Moreover, effectiveness is often evaluated without distinguishing between strategy and implementation. One contribution academics and experts can make is proposing detailed policy prescriptions and implementation plans for discrete, local areas. Too often when policy makers are open to new strategies, those strategies die at the level of implementation, where government capacity tends to be very limited. As one participant summarized, most drug programs tend to be analytically weak, poorly designed, and poorly implemented.

Another problem in thinking about a harm reduction approach to supply-side policies is that, in general, governments are not willing to have a policy approach, but rather only a law enforcement approach. More often than not, governments value the appearance of a successful law enforcement model over any tangible results. Hence, non-governmental experts need to insist on a policy approach—and a transparent one. Again, the question comes back to what are the ultimate goals and how can they be achieved? In many countries, concern with crack consumption runs high, but very little

data on consumption and the size of the market exists, precisely because there is not a culture of looking at the issue from a policy point of view. No country would expect its central bank to make policy without basic information about the economy, but that is exactly what happens with drug policy.

From a political point of view, it is very hard for any politician to say that he or she is not concerned about reducing drug use. In the case of the police programs described earlier, targeting drug markets, the police forces involved were explicit about reducing harms, but did not publicize that they were not concerned with drug use. In these cases, decreasing the worst harms associated with the drug markets is a politically acceptable goal in and of itself. However, the arguments get much more difficult when the approach is applied in source countries. In Brazil, prior to the adoption of the Police Pacification Units (*Unidade de Polícia Pacificadora, UPP*), a program was launched to retake territory in the *favelas* and those involved said that they did not care about drug-related issues; the program died quickly for lack of political support. Another harm reduction approach implemented in Laos encountered similar problems. The country's drug law—now amended—allowed for cultivation of opium poppies for personal use. This approach was designed to limit the negative impact of the black market. However, it was ultimately changed due to political pressure.

One response to these practical policy dilemmas is to present the approach differently. As one participant said, if the drug policy narrative is too forbidding, can the discussion be broadened so that the policy is seen as not just focused on drug policy? Turning that argument around, the participant later asked, is the drug policy arena so contaminated that a harm reduction approach could never bear fruit?

In the case of Colombia, the disconnect between government policies and the realities on the ground in the country's Pacific coast needs to be addressed. To date, that policy has focused on either the hard-line criminalization of the population or a soft economic approach that never takes root. Aside from economics, the psychology and culture of coca cultivation must be taken into account. A fundamental question is why do people decide to cultivate coca? Rationales include coercion, perceived economic benefits, glorification of the drug culture, and the political power it can bring. For many, however, coca cultivation is a way to obtain cash income when no other viable economic alternatives are available or where they are undermined by fumigation efforts. Once a person begins cultivation, it is very difficult to move out of it.

Interesting examples can be found in Colombia of communities deciding to lead their own eradication efforts so as to do away with the harmful effects that come from the presence of drug trafficking and subsequent drug control efforts in their communities. In other words, in some cases local communities have developed their own harm reduction approach, though they did not call it that. The motivation for community coca eradication efforts may be lack of confidence or trust in government institutions to

provide protection and services (so communities come up with their own solutions), or as a means of reducing violence or in order to promote food security, among others.

In the Afro-Colombian Yurumanguí River region, the leaders who remain in the collective territories identified both the spread of coca cultivation and fumigation as the main causes of displacement and a threat to their security, culture, and livelihoods. Manual eradication also brought threats from armed groups. In response, they initiated a campaign, “I am a respectable Yurumanguireño, I do not consume nor do I cultivate coca.” In 2000, the Afro-Colombian Assembly of the Community Council of Yurumanguí announced that it would not permit the planting of coca in its territories and in 2007 it proactively began eliminating coca plants. These efforts were linked to educational and community-building efforts. Although met with some resistance by guerrillas, they did not interfere; indeed, one impact was to decrease the FARC’s influence in the region. From the community’s point of view, their efforts—obtained on their own without government support—were successful; however, the cultivation moved to other areas of the country.

One harm reduction approach related to cultivation that is widely discussed at the level of the United Nations is that of “proper sequencing.” Taking into account the point made earlier that most farmers grow coca or poppy due to lack of alternative sources of income, eliminating that income without providing alternatives results in re-planting. As a result, short-term gains in reducing cultivation are quickly reversed. An alternative approach that is both more effective and takes into account the harms caused by eradication is to ensure that efforts to reduce crops do not begin until alternative income-generating activities are firmly in place.

The discussion returned to the issue of what are the ultimate policy goals. In the case of coca and poppy, is it to reduce cultivation or something else? This raises the fundamental issue of indicators: How is success measured? In the case of cultivation, it should be measured based on human development indicators and overall improvements in the communities’ quality of life. One participant highlighted that governments respond to incentives, so providing better sets of performance measures may be a way to get their attention, as it gives them something better to work with. Yet not all harms are easy to measure, such as corruption.

The fundamental policy goal, according to some participants, is to minimize the threat that drug trafficking poses to: 1) the state; 2) citizen security; 3) state institutions via corruption; 4) the economy via economic distortions; 5) the environment; and 6) public health. Prioritizing and anticipating consequences may be very difficult, but these should be the priority areas. This implies a move away from the discourse of supply reduction as the main policy focus.

Several participants pointed out that sometimes the best harm reduction approach is to do nothing, as the danger of a failed policy can be worse than doing nothing. If doing

nothing is not politically viable, as most politicians would claim, then the focus should be on minimizing the maximum harm that can be caused. However, the “doing less harm by doing less” approach will not necessarily work if the overall framework is not changed. For example, as long as the traditional law enforcement approach remains entrenched in the United States, the number of people in jail can be reduced, but the country would still likely have more people in jail than in previous decades or in comparison to other countries. Presently, some reconsideration of sentencing policies is taking place in the United States, but incarceration levels have not changed. And while U.S. government officials have placed greater emphasis on treatment and prevention, the problem is still defined as a criminal justice issue. How does a country like the United States shift away from a punitive criminal justice approach?

Picking up on the harm reduction-oriented policing described previously, one participant noted that police do respond positively to incentives. As an example, he described how in Rio de Janeiro, a change in police behavior led to a reduction in the number of police killings, to 500 in 2010 from 1,300 in 2007. At the same time, the adoption of a new drug law in 2006 led to a 62 percent increase in the number of people incarcerated on drug charges (as compared to eight percent for other crimes), yet judges initially focused on the individual cases, rather than the big picture, and did not question the practical impact of the new law on the nation’s prisons and people’s lives.

Returning to the issue of trade-offs, one of the initial speakers pointed out that there is often a perceived trade-off between harm reduction and security. In response, one person gave the example of the UPPs in Brazil to show that the perception does not necessarily match reality. The UPPs are designed to reduce violence, improve citizen security, and enhance state presence in the *favelas*. Whether or not one agrees with the “pacification” model, it has had some success, and the harms involved are much lower than in previous efforts as the approach is community-oriented and involves a range of social programs.

At the end of the first session, a question was asked about the academic study of Belgium mentioned in the first presentation. The focus of the research was the harms caused by drug trafficking—not drug use itself. Although a large amount of cocaine goes through that country, the researchers concluded that trafficking per se did not cause many harms and those that did result were primarily harms to the people involved in trafficking themselves (for example, those ingesting cocaine to transport it who overdosed). Very little violence or corruption was attributed to the trafficking, which led to a discussion of how the government could better allocate its resources. Yet the underlying question is politically difficult: What happens when most of those being harmed are engaged in illegal or criminal activities? In many ways, Belgium was an easy country to evaluate; the challenge now is to look at countries characterized by more complex and messy situations.

One of the final issues raised is the link between applying harm reduction to supply and demand-side efforts. One participant posited, that, if the goal is to manage drug markets to minimize harms associated with illicit activities and control policies, then the issues of legalization and decriminalization need to be part of the discussion. What does that mean for the supply-side? Should we also be talking about the decriminalization of small-scale coca and poppy producers? The final intervention raised many more questions than answers, but provided much food for thought.

Session II: Public Opinion and Policy Reform Opportunities

Session II focused on how to enhance the appeal of supply-oriented harm reduction approaches for the public and policy makers. The conference organizers laid out numerous questions to spark debate:

- What are the impediments to adoption of supply-oriented harm reduction, including intellectual, semantic, political, bureaucratic/institutional, and cultural obstacles?
- What are the public's main concerns regarding illicit drugs and related problems?
- What are the values and principles around which a shift toward harm reduction might be framed?
- Are there arguments/narratives/processes with potential to overcome impediments to application of harm reduction strategies?
- What are the costs (political, social, economic, etc.) of continuing with status quo policies?
- Are there specific governments, agencies, or officials already prepared to implement a harm reduction approach?
- Are there foreseeable policy reform opportunities where the stage is already being set, and where research/advocacy should contribute?
- How can open-minded officials be identified and cultivated?

As the first session initiated discussion of the political complexities of promoting a harm reduction approach to supply-side policies, the moderator asked for very short interventions so as to jump back into the debate that had already begun.

Opening Remarks

The most important challenge in addressing the issue of public opinion, according to the first presenter, is the lack of democracy in the drug policy debate. The issue is treated as taboo. Having an evidence-based debate is not only extremely difficult, but also cast as radical; yet the more radical position is avoiding a democratic debate. Even in cases where the media is open to debate, political actors are not. For example, in Brazil at one point, the most important newspapers and broadcasters wanted to have a meaningful discussion on drug policy (in contrast to the media in many other countries), yet the political actors refused. Any politician who has a position of seeking to open the debate can be stigmatized as not being sufficiently “tough on drugs.”

Therefore, he concluded, this is not a challenge for drug policy, but a challenge for democracy. Within a real democracy, people with different points of view have the space to discuss issues and attempt to convince others that they are right. That is not the case with drug policy.

He then turned to the question of what democratic institutions can offer when the debate is completely closed. In the case of drug policy, the judiciary—in countries that have judicial review processes—can be a place for evidence-based debate. The judiciary is where arguments can be balanced and discussion take place without the emotions that emerge for those involved in electoral processes. In the case of Brazil, all of the recent advances in drug policy have come from the judiciary, which has played a very important role in promoting policy change.

Recently, the Brazilian judiciary ruled to give judges the discretion to apply alternatives to incarceration to low-level or street-level drug dealers, particularly those in the gray area between users and small-scale traffickers. (This was not allowed in the 2006 drug law.) In a similar decision, the judiciary ruled that banning pre-trial release for those arrested on drug charges (also included in the 2006 legislation), regardless of the gravity of the crime committed, is unconstitutional. These examples show that the judiciary offers a space for reasoned debate that can lead to policy change.

In concluding, the speaker reaffirmed the importance of seeing the judiciary as an important arena for presenting evidence-based arguments. In many cases policy advances will eventually fall to the judiciary. In anticipation, legal arguments must be honed and made ready. This also implies the need to change the language used from a policy approach to a legal one. In short, the judiciary provides one opportunity for opening up and overcoming the barriers to an evidence-based debate.

The second speaker began with a provocative question for policy makers: What kind of criminals do we want to have? The answer, she said, is that we want criminals who are not very violent and do not have much capacity to corrupt, and we want markets as isolated from society as possible. In contrast to the past, U.S. policy makers do show

greater recognition of this. For example, several years ago in meetings with U.S. officials in Mexico, they would never agree with the idea that the focus should be on shaping criminality to reduce violence rather than illicit drug flows. Today, in such meetings, there is openness to such arguments; U.S. officials may not be explicit about it, but they understand the importance of putting more attention on violence reduction.

However, this debate is very complicated politically and has its own institutional limitations. She also made the point that on those rare occasions when radical change is implemented in the drug policy arena, more often than not, such change is not institutionalized and is personality-driven and therefore can be easily reversed.

Other changes can be perceived within the U.S. government. For example, regarding Colombia, U.S. officials have shown more willingness to move away from a zero-coca approach (complete crop eradication before any offer of development assistance) and are putting far more resources into alternative livelihoods. (Some in the U.S. government argue that alternative development is not effective, yet even if that were the case it is the least damaging of the policy options.) Surprisingly, however, the U.S. government now gets pushback from the local government. It is no longer the case that the U.S. government imposes its agenda on other countries. The Colombian government remains wedded to a zero-coca approach, regardless of U.S. policy, while Mexico adamantly rejects the idea of carrying out alternative livelihood projects.

In the case of West Africa, when the drug issue first emerged as a problem, officials from different countries said that they would not support counternarcotics efforts there and if they did anything, it would be state building. In fact, the pre-existing governance conditions are often more important than the external problems and drive the policy response, even on counternarcotics issues. However, now the West African countries are the ones demanding counternarcotics assistance.

Another interesting change in the receptivity of U.S. policy makers, according to the speaker, is related to crop displacement and the balloon effect. While the balloon effect is now widely recognized, governments are not willing to admit that even with a well-designed policy, drug production, and shipment will still take place. For example, U.S. policy makers accept the idea of the balloon effect and hence are now willing to think about a Western Hemisphere-wide policy, but they are not willing to admit that even with such an approach, the drug trade will continue.

If one accepts the balloon effect, then the question that really needs to be asked is, which country are you going to sentence to being producer and transshipment countries? Unfortunately, this discussion is too politically sensitive to have, as there is pervasive fear that even the mere discussion will leak out to the government in question or into the policy debate. However, if this discussion were to take place one conclusion would likely be that it is better to have poppy production back in Myanmar, rather than have it shift from Afghanistan to Pakistan.

The presenter concluded with two comments. First, the United States is not the only key actor anymore. While there is still great demand from other countries, such as those in West Africa, for U.S. counternarcotics aid, important new players are on the scene, Russia and China in particular. For some countries, working with those two countries is even more important than working with the United States.

Second, some U.S. agencies and congressional offices have shown more interest in devising more robust and broader performance indicators, though they have met with resistance. For example, the Southwest Border strategy includes an index on the quality of living. Though this could represent a major improvement in effective evaluation, some in the Congress and relevant agencies are adamantly opposed to adopting such an approach. As highlighted in the previous session, another potential problem with improving performance measures is the difficulty of collecting data on-the-ground. In other words, even when there is receptivity, actually getting the data can be difficult or even impossible.

The final speaker began by emphasizing the need to recognize differing ethical approaches to drug policy. A glimpse of this is found in listening to defenders of current policy, such as members of the police. They share some very strong, emotionally-anchored convictions on human nature that have a direct impact on drug policy.

He then asked, how many would share the classic, liberal view that any adult person should be free to do what he or she pleases as long as other people are not directly or indirectly harmed? Or, to what extent are mind-altering drugs bad? Finally, he posed the question, if even a small number of users who, after consuming a drug, have car accidents, is that sufficient to justify limiting drugs at the source? Is it a societal obligation to prevent this from happening? These views are still very strong with regards to illegal drugs. In fact, some politicians will argue that making sure drugs are not produced in the first place is the best way to prevent them from getting into schools. These convictions underlying present policies need to be addressed in order to argue for a harm reduction approach.

The harm reduction approach accepts that some human desires may lead to negative consequences and that reversing these consequences is not possible in a free society, thus the goal should be to limit or minimize them. In contrast, it is intellectually simpler to say that such harms should just be eliminated. A harm reduction approach is much more difficult to argue and to grasp.

The speaker then turned to the issue of opportunities, or necessities, for policy reform along the cocaine value chain, from Colombia to the U.S. border. The Latin American Commission on Drugs and Democracy has provided an opening for discussing drug policy reforms; how far that debate goes remains to be seen. However, it is interesting that it is taking place independently of the United States and in the post-9/11

environment. One impediment to policy reforms, he noted, is the fiscal policy in many Latin American countries, where tax rates are very low relative to GDP. As a result, these countries can maintain their bureaucracies, but do not invest in reconstituting state institutions.

Political alliances are also crucial for drug policy reform. For change to happen, it is imperative that the “social left”—civil society organizations or individuals who stay away from politics—be activated and be integrated into a broad coalition spanning the center-left to center-right, as a way to overcome resistance to reforms. At the regional level, a Latin American alliance without the participation of the United States—presently characterized by policy paralysis in areas such as drugs, arms and migration—is needed and would be more constructive than anything that goes through the Organization of American States (OAS).

In the presenter’s view, the impact of drug trafficking on state institutions is clearly a factor in the crisis confronting Central America and some sort of low-level international interventions are needed. If basic institutions are not functioning, they should be substituted temporarily by multilateral institutions, as is the case with the International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala (*Comisión Internacional contra la Impunidad en Guatemala*, CICIG). For example, if the police are not able to operate effectively, they should be replaced with a multilateral police force, and the same should happen with judges. There is a lot of opposition to this within Latin America as this is seen as external intervention and an affront to national sovereignty. However, in the presenter’s view, if such drastic measures are not taken, the emergence of another Haiti in the region in the next 10 to 20 years is likely.

Discussion

The discussion turned to the thorny question, once the balloon effect is accepted, which countries should be home to illegal drug production and major venues for trafficking routes? What happened in the Dutch Antilles provides a good example. The Dutch effectively shut down the cocaine pipeline going from the Antilles to the Netherlands by searching everyone on the planes going that route. However, afterwards the drug trafficking route through West Africa emerged. Though no direct evidence of causality exists, it was foreseeable that in shutting down one route another would be opened. From a harm reduction point of view, keeping the trafficking in a small country where the problems were less severe and the government has a greater capacity to handle it would have been better. These sorts of consequences and policy options should at least be thought about and discussed, despite the political difficulties of doing so reiterated throughout the workshop.

Another example given of how law enforcement efforts can push the drug market and those involved towards more harmful practices can be found in the Netherlands, where coffee shops can sell cannabis but where there are no legal means for the coffee shops

to purchase it. Police stepped up law enforcement efforts against growers selling to the coffee shops, which pushed a lot of small, and basically harmless, farmers out of the market and thereby increased the market share of more organized and dangerous traffickers. Judges have struggled with this as the counterproductive impact of the law enforcement strategy is clear, but they do not have the legal tools needed to distinguish between different types of cultivators. One policy recommendation is therefore to give judges the legal tools and guidelines that would allow them to make more differentiated decisions, with the goal of leaving more space for the least harmful actors in the market. Another participant pointed out that in fact, law enforcement efforts often push out the “mom and pop” operations, hence the importance of working with the police as they develop strategies for enforcing drug laws.

An extended discussion ensued on whether supply-oriented harm reduction could provide a way to change the current discourse in Mexico. One way of reducing violence is to move away from targeting high-value traffickers and focus on mid-level actors. However, President Calderon remains wedded to high-value targeting, despite the fact that the turn over at the top causes power struggles that result in increased levels of violence. This lesson was learned in Colombia, where drug lords were under extreme pressure at one point to prove themselves, as is often the case in Mexico today. In addition, going after high-level targets leads to the increased fragmentation of some groups, and hence increased violence. The government’s capacity to carry out a high-value target strategy must also be taken into account, as it requires a significant investment of time and resources. Finally, while targeting mid-level actors decreases the tendency toward violence, it will not affect the volume of the drug trade per se. Another option for Mexico would be to sequentially target the most violent groups, as described previously in the case of the Boston Gun Project and High Point in the United States, creating a situation where eventually drug traffickers seek to avoid extreme violence.

A complicating factor for Mexico is the growing supply of those willing to be involved in criminal activity. One participant maintained that Mexico is going through a profound social shift and the loosening of social controls that in the past helped to keep the murder rate low. As a result, more people seek involvement in gangs and engage in violent crime. If this is indeed the case, any change in tactics is unlikely to decrease overall levels of violence in the short or medium term. Yet another complicating factor is that large criminal organizations across the region have “democratized” their criminal activities. In addition to drug trafficking, they are often engaged in human trafficking, arms trafficking, and many different forms of extortion, among other criminal activities.

In the case of Brazil, some years ago Sao Paulo brought its homicide rate down to 10 from about 38 per 100,000 annually. While the reasons for the drop in murders are not totally clear, one theory is that a new criminal organization gained control of the city’s drug markets and showed an increased capacity to negotiate with police. Also, the major leaders of that particular criminal network were in jail—hence the police could not go after them—and they were able to control illicit activities from there. This

experience points to the need for more investigative research on why drug dealing is more violent in some places than in others and the factors that lead to increased violence in different situations.

A debate followed on what factors cause violence in the drug trade. These include the structure of the market, cultural issues, and the quality of law enforcement and justice sector efforts. The latter is one that governments have some control over. For example, the United States has been very successful in implementing effective police reform programs, though unfortunately there are few other good examples. In Colombia, violence has historically served as a way of regulating conflicts. As long as impunity remains pervasive—96 percent of all murders never go to trial—violence will continue to persist as a means of dealing with conflict. This situation underscores the need for police and justice sector reform. Moreover, the tendency to ignore the penetration of the state by criminal organizations is of particular concern.

One of the reasons policy makers tend to focus on high-level targets is because it is much harder to deal with the overall problem of weak governments, which is another factor leading to drug trafficking and crime. Increasingly, public rhetoric is shifting to recognize the importance of winning popular support and building state presence in areas where violent criminal activities proliferate (such as in Colombia and Brazil). However, the Brazilian experience with the UPPs shows that improving governance does not necessarily lead to less drug trafficking. A similar argument can be made regarding improvements in the rule of law.

One participant asked how to apply this discussion to transit countries; in other words, who should be targeted by law enforcement efforts in that situation? Interdiction increases the size of the market and profits for those who survive. Colombia provides an example of how the elimination of one cartel immediately leads to the rise of another. Numerous ideas were put forth for alternative policy approaches in transit countries. “Mom and pop” operations should be left alone. If there is one criminal group dominating the market, let them operate but communicate with the leaders to limit their activities and in particular, corruption. If there are a variety of groups, target the most violent and those most engaged in corruption.

The situation of “source” countries was not discussed in detail in the session. However, one participant noted that three narratives put forth by policy makers make it difficult to apply a harm reduction approach to crop reduction efforts: 1) forced eradication is justified because the end product is illegal; 2) small farmers cultivate poppies or coca not because they are poor, but because they are greedy (a false narrative in most cases); and 3) the drug trade finances insurgent groups, though the fact that it also finances many people in government receives far less attention. These rationales are used to justify a repressive approach and to maintain the illegality and criminality of small farmers.

The issue was also briefly raised of how to reframe the “what do we want” approach to ask, what kind of drugs do we want and how does that affect drug markets? In other words, policies need to distinguish between less and more harmful drugs and the kinds of markets they generate. For example, with regard to stimulants, policies should be designed to push markets towards less harmful stimulants and to focus enforcement on more dangerous ones.

Cannabis provides an opportunity for thinking about how to implement a harm reduction approach to supply-side policies. Several participants suggested that the best way to reduce the harm caused by illicit drug markets would be to move to legal, regulated ones. This position argues for thinking outside of the prohibitionist framework and requires grappling with the challenges to implementing such a regulated market.

Brazil provides an example of where the government has been able to focus on an explicit violence reduction strategy, via the UPPs. When asked if drug dealing still took place in one pacified *favela*, a high-level official responded that it did, but that the government had achieved its objectives of reducing the violence and moving out drug trafficking operations, so as to give the space back to the communities. The ability for an official to make such a statement publicly was facilitated by the perception that many Brazilians have that the UPP strategy is having clear results in some *favelas*. In addition, the first step in the strategy involves the army moving into communities with a great deal of force (and often repression). Initially, the soldiers were met with some violent responses on the part of organized crime and they responded with a great deal of military force. As a result, the government has the image of being “tough on drugs” even as it implements a more community-oriented approach.

This experience underscores the likelihood that government officials will not embrace an approach that makes them seem weak on crime. Hence, any policy alternative needs to present policymakers in a strong light. For example, in the United States many cities are already seeking to shape the drug market; it is just not explicitly recognized. How can harm reduction advocates promote recognition of the successes that have been obtained to date through these efforts? Can experiences like those in Brazil, Boston, and High Point be recognized as harm reduction efforts that delivered results for the people in those communities? How can the appeal of a harm reduction approach be increased, especially given that “complexity can be an enemy in public policy?”

Another obstacle to supply-oriented harm reduction is the need to admit that neither drug use nor the drug trade are going to stop, which in the United States and some other countries is viewed as an unacceptable admission of failure. Yet another reason policy endures even when fully or partially failing is due to bureaucratic interests; indeed, policy change is the exception and continuity is the norm. So why does policy change occur? Is it due to public opinion, or pressure from key interest groups? Gaining a better understanding of past experiences of policy change is crucial to promoting drug policy reform.

According to one communications expert participating in the workshop, the de-legitimization of current policy is essential. The problem and the current policy must be defined as part of the problem and counterproductive. Once that is accomplished, the harms policy is intended to address and effective policy tools can be determined. An effective communications strategy should provide examples or narratives related to the harms and policy alternatives. Another participant pointed out that Brazil's UPP strategy resonated with people because in seeking to reduce violence, it appeals to the human instinct of wanting to be protected. It also shows—by tackling violence—that criminals can operate in a different way. Finally, in giving the *favelas* back to the communities, it gives people the sense that they will gain as a result; in other words, something is in it for them. The combination of these three points makes for a powerful argument in favor of a supply-oriented harm reduction approach.

Session III: Network Building

The goal of session three was to contribute to the growth of a global multi-disciplinary research and advocacy network to apply harm reduction to supply-oriented policy. Conference organizers posed three questions to the participants in the expert workshop:

- What other researchers/advocates, across disciplines and countries, might be engaged?
- What like-minded networking may already be occurring?
- What literature already exists, and how can it be best shared and promoted?

Opening Remarks

Two very brief interventions initiated the discussion. The first speaker spoke of two networking opportunities. The first was an International Workshop on Alternative Development (ICAD) organized by the government of Thailand in close collaboration with the government of Peru and the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). The purpose of the workshop, which subsequently took place in northern Thailand from November 6-12, 2011, was to bring together experts, practitioners, and government officials to learn from experiences to date (particularly in Thailand, which virtually eliminated poppy cultivation for opium and heroin production through a long-term economic development effort). The participants in Thailand shared best practices and developed a draft set of International Guiding Principles on Alternative Development that was adopted by governments at an International Conference on Alternative

Development in Lima, Peru, in November 2012.³ It was said that the issues related to drug-linked crops discussed during the course of the expert workshop on supply-oriented harm reduction should be put forward during these discussions.

Another key networking opportunity is the annual conference of the International Harm Reduction Association, now called Harm Reduction International (HRI). Although the conference is focused on demand-reduction issues, last year TNI organized a workshop on harm reduction in producer countries. The HRI conference provides an excellent opportunity to engage with individuals already involved in harm reduction efforts on the demand side, to learn from their efforts and to create partnerships with them, with the ultimate goal of developing a network of groups and individuals committed to harm reduction on both the demand and supply-side. The HRI conference brings together hundreds of people to talk about harm reduction on the consumption side; our challenge is to provoke discussion and debate on applying that approach to the production side. In other words, supply-oriented harm reduction advocates must get the message out as to why this is important and why others should be interested as well.

The speaker concluded by pointing to two efforts with which supply-side harm reduction advocates should be engaged. The first is the International Drug Policy Consortium (IDPC), which is a global network of non-government organizations and professional networks that specialize in issues related to illegal drug production and use. IDPC aims to promote objective and open debate on the effectiveness, direction and content of drug policies at national and international level, and supports evidence-based policies that are effective in reducing drug-related harm. It produces briefing papers, disseminates the reports of its member organizations, and offers expert consultancy services to policy makers and officials around the world.

The second is a campaign organized by Transform Drug Policy Foundation, a leading center of expertise on drug policy and law reform based in the United Kingdom. The campaign “Count the Costs” brings together a coalition of groups and is based on the premise that the war on drugs creates massive costs, resulting from the enforcement-led approach that puts organized crime in control of the trade. The campaign seeks to “count these costs and explore the alternatives, using the best evidence available, to deliver a safer, healthier and more just world.”

Both of these efforts involve looking across the drug production and consumption chain. They are natural allies and a good place to start selling the concept of supply-oriented harm reduction.

The second person who provided opening remarks put forward supply-oriented harm

³ The report from that meeting and the Guiding Principles can be found at: : http://icad2011-2012.org/wp-content/uploads/ICAD_2012_Report_and_Input_for_International_Guiding_Principles.pdf

reduction as a framing issue. As messy as it is, it provides a way of thinking about effective policy alternatives. This is particularly needed in Mexico and Central America, yet to date little discussion or debate on this approach has taken place there even within progressive circles. For example, supply-oriented harm reduction was not on the agenda of the International Drug Policy Conference in Mexico in September 2011. Yet new thinking on Mexico is sorely needed. Present proposals do not go beyond stating the need to throw out the government, get rid of the cartels, and reduce violence. What is needed is to redefine the harms and develop a clear set of drug policy goals; that would be a big step forward for the debate in Mexico.

A similar argument can be made for Central America. The World Bank recently released a new report on crime and violence in that region⁴ in which the section on drug trafficking again offers no solutions. It recommends that Central American countries avoid going the Mexican route of taking on the traffickers because they will lose, without offering any other alternative. The group participating in the expert workshop may not have the answer either, but if we do not engage in the discussion, then those on the right or other actors in Central America will define the terms of the debate in ways that we will not like.

In summary, Mexico and Central America are key places to think about applying a supply-oriented harm reduction strategy in Latin America. Opportunities may exist in other parts of the region, but it is in Mexico and Central America where new thinking is desperately needed.

He also agreed with the previous speaker on the need to engage with those already involved in the harm reduction community and highlighted the need to develop advocacy, rather than scholarly, networks. More research is not needed in order to spark and shape the debate; what are needed are more opinion pieces in key newspapers and high-profile individuals entering into the debate in different ways.

Discussion

The last remark elicited a reply from academics in the room, who pointed out that the research community working on this issue is very small, more tools are needed for analysis, and the evidence base needs to be developed to show that supply-oriented harm reduction is a viable option. The previous presenter did not disagree, but stressed that those seeking a change in policy should not wait for the results of that research to come in before engaging in advocacy efforts. But the danger exists, posited an academic, of heading off in a wrong direction if the evidence is not yet there.

Another academic agreed with the importance of engaging with the demand-oriented harm reduction community and also stressed the importance of reviewing the existing

⁴ http://issuu.com/world.bank.publications/docs/crime_and_violence_in_central_america_en

demand-side harm reduction literature to see how the term can and cannot be applied, the politics behind it and the like, in order to enter into the debate with open eyes.

Another expert pointed to the need to try to assess what other research is ongoing that might be related, particularly that focused on law enforcement, that lends itself to like-mindedness. What other research communities might be grappling with these issues? What are the sources of funding for that research? And are there governments interested in pursuing this? In other words, we should not be too narrow in seeking out research communities that are looking at similar problems. Finally, he asked, are there conversations beginning to take place in specific countries (perhaps Australia) where this approach is being discussed or conditions are ripe for it to be introduced?

In response to some of the questions raised, one expert pointed out that the few academics working on this approach have done a pretty thorough literary review and identifying the key players is relatively easy. Some agencies in the British and Australian governments are interested, and now the Belgian government is showing more interest. While interest is definitely increasing, the existing literature remains surprisingly limited. Another participant reiterated the need to develop case studies to show that the approach has worked or could work, and also to look at what governments have done in countries such as Afghanistan and Myanmar even if they do not call it harm reduction.

One way of moving forward in building an evidence base is to create demand for this kind of research, particularly in terms of generating interest in governments for better research—convincing them of the need to carry out research to improve policy responses—as they are a key source of funding. For example, in the United States very little research exists on what law enforcement actually does. How can governments be stimulated to seek out and fund such research? This would also have an important multiplier effect. One example could be the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA), which has the kind of credibility needed to push this agenda forward. The EMCDDA only recently began looking at supply-side issues but they are now undertaking more research on drug production and trafficking issues. Its attitude and role was critical in the EU acceptance of harm reduction on the consumption side; without the EMCDDA, harm reduction would not have been incorporated into the EU drug strategy. EMCDDA recently released a voluminous report on harm reduction strategies in Europe, how the concept has evolved, and what programs are in place, which is an extremely important addition to the existing literature.

An opportunity for promoting research in this area is the Drugs, Security and Democracy fellowship program,⁵ funded by the Open Society Foundations and implemented by the Social Science Research Council. The program supports graduate and post-graduate research on organized crime, drug policy, issues of governance, and associated topics

⁵ <http://www.ssrc.org/fellowships/dsd-fellowship>

across the social sciences and related disciplines, with an eye towards developing a concentration of researchers who are interested in policy-relevant outcomes and membership in a global interdisciplinary network.

If we treat supply-oriented harm reduction as a construct for analyzing policies, important work could be done looking at what policies are in place in different countries, identifying the underlying assumptions about the harms caused by drug control policies, and then juxtaposing those assumptions with information about the actual harms. While policy is not likely to change in the next few years, efforts to enhance the policy relevance of supply-oriented harm reduction frameworks should begin now, while the empirical research continues. Hence, the outcome of the debate on prioritizing advocacy or academic studies was that the two have to go hand-in-hand.

The next intervention, nonetheless, highlighted the sense of urgency for developing policy alternatives in Mexico now. While the need for a better research agenda and foundation for implementing harm reduction policies is clear, it is also clear that there are growing demands for articulating policy alternatives. Civil society groups involved in the Movement for Peace with Justice and Dignity in Mexico have gained some momentum, but the biggest criticism they face is that they are not asking for anything specific in terms of policy recommendations and ways of stopping the violence. Groups like WOLA have long advocated the need for institutional reforms and will continue to do that. But a new tune is needed now—a new message to respond to the immediate crisis—and if we do not formulate it, someone else will.

The discussion then turned to a subject that received relatively little attention during the workshop: How to apply a supply-oriented harm reduction approach to the issue of alternative development. When the debate on applying harm reduction to supply-side policies first emerged, it seemed logical that the approach could most easily be applied to the extreme other side, small-scale coca and poppy farmers, as similar reasoning could be applied and be politically acceptable, as with users. Surprisingly, harm reduction on the law enforcement side has advanced more than on the cultivation side. After listening to the workshop discussion, one participant stated, a key reason appears to be that, especially with regard to the issue of violence, the benefits for society as a whole are much clearer than would be the case with small farmers. Another reason is that thinking about applying harm reduction to the situation of small farmers has been overshadowed by the ongoing international debate about alternative development. Over the last decade, significant international discussion has led to the emergence of an alternative livelihoods approach that offers more possibility of success. In that sense, this is a good moment to be injecting the harm reduction concept and tools into the debate.

One country that is carrying out a harm reduction approach to cultivation is Bolivia, though Bolivian officials would not refer to it that way. A coca “rationalization” strategy is being implemented there that seeks to avoid the conflict and violence that

characterized previous forced coca eradication campaigns. That begs the question, noted another participant, as to whether or not the ultimate goal is to reduce violence or move the cultivation somewhere else. The obvious example of a success story is Thailand which, as noted, virtually eliminated poppy production under extremely auspicious circumstances and through a massive economic development and state-building project. Many elements of such state building fall outside of the scope of traditional alternative development projects, generating significant resource, time and institutional demands. Often, neither domestic elites nor donors have the political appetite to undertake such endeavors. However, even if results remain elusive, governments may still want to put resources into alternative development programs because it is the least harmful approach.

The discussion returned to the importance—from the point of view of presenting supply oriented harm reduction as a useful framework for policy questions—of looking for case studies or success stories where changes led to positive results even though the harm reduction terminology was not used, either because it was avoided for political reasons or because nobody thought to cast it in those terms. Given the politically charged nature of harm reduction language, some governments or researchers may feel that such terminology must be avoided. Nonetheless, advocates of that approach should be searching wide enough to be able to identify and use any experiences that may be relevant.

A question was asked as to whether the UNODC could currently play a useful role in promoting research or creating more political space for debate on supply-oriented harm reduction. The short answer was a resounding no. For the past decade, civil society actors have tried to get the UN drug bureaucracy to adopt support for harm reduction on the consumption side, yet UNODC still has not embraced the concept (even though harm reduction is widely accepted in other UN agencies). As soon as the harm reduction terminology is brought forth, UNODC becomes cautious. Some advances are evident within the UNODC, which has moved away from the concept of a “drug free world” towards that of containment, recognizing that some drug markets will continue to exist. Despite these shifts, bringing them on board as a full ally and promoter of supply-oriented harm reduction would still be very difficult to do at this point. That led to a brief discussion of whether or not the idea of containment is a good proxy term or alternative to the harm reduction language. As one participant pointed out, the problem is that containment raises the question of what do you contain and where?

Differing views regarding the harm reduction terminology can be found among the members of the International Society for the Study of Drug Policy (ISSDP), which includes drug policy analysts and academics from a variety of fields. While some show resistance to talking about harm reduction—and even claim that it is essentially academic suicide for any researcher to use such terminology—others are more open to the idea. However, some of those working on harm reduction from the demand side express concerns that using the vocabulary on the supply side could dilute their

message or even undermine their work. How the vocabulary is being used and potentially abused is still a matter of much debate.

One of the communications experts in the workshop pointed out that the essence of harm reduction is really about prioritizing and using resources more effectively and that advocates should not have to apologize for it sounding like a “weak” approach. Harm may be a weak word and perhaps conveys a meaning that is not helpful; however, explaining it in terms of prioritizing and effectiveness could advance the terminology. In response, one participant asked, “Do we need to adopt a new term, put it out there and just keep using it until it is accepted?” In response, another participant posited that not only one label is needed. For some audiences, the harm reduction language may be just fine; for others, cost-benefit analysis may be more useful; and still others may respond better to targeted law enforcement. In the end, it is better to have more than one way to convey the concept, depending on the audience, as the goal is for people to embrace the concept, not necessarily the language per se.

An interesting twist was suggested of presenting harm reduction as a way to sustain prohibitionist policies or make them work better. First, if prohibitionists want to legitimate their approach, they must subject it to such analysis. (Though when the harms are measured, a compelling case for a change in strategy may be the result.) Second, for prohibition to continue, it must prove to be more efficient than it is now. To the extent that prohibition remains viable, its excesses need to be addressed; the brutality overdose needs to be corrected.

One concrete example was provided. Zero-tolerance strategies push milder drugs off the market. Therefore, pushing markets toward less harmful drugs may make prohibition more effective. Alcohol prohibition was a failure because it was a zero-tolerance strategy that banned the manufacture and sale of all alcoholic beverages, but when it was lifted the remaining prohibition on absinthe was very effective for many decades because enough alternatives were available. In short, prohibition could be made to work better by adopting the harm reduction tactic of focusing on the most harmful substances. Cannabis and mild stimulants should be treated differently than more dangerous drugs. A similar argument could be made for taking a more pragmatic look at the legal highs now appearing on the market. The tendency is to add them all to the lists of prohibited drugs, but a better strategy might be to leave some of them alone and steer the market in a less harmful direction.

Concluding Remarks

The moderator then asked the conference organizers to offer some concluding remarks. As noted at the beginning of the workshop, it was billed as the *first* expert meeting on the topic. The conference organizers had no pretense that all of the outstanding problems would be solved in one day, and the discussion verified that much still needs to be researched, debated, and implemented. The discussion also verified the support

for developing these ideas and that they have real potential—not only because of some nebulous possibility of results, but because experiences and successes are out there, including in the messaging, that are addressing concrete concerns with positive results.

Without charting next steps, the conference organizer asked those present to think about how, coming off these conversations, they could each bring more people into similar kinds of discussions in each one's national and institutional settings and think of this as the beginning of a process to build networking and programs. He also reiterated the need not to be wedded to one label, but to choose that which works for certain audiences and to seek to build real results. He noted his satisfaction with the level of engagement, as well as the level of realism, about what more is required to develop and promote supply-oriented harm reduction. He also highlighted the need to build bridges from researchers to policy makers and to seek out different settings to have these kinds of conversations with policy makers.

The other conference sponsor began by expressing full agreement on the terminology issue, noting that a logical step to make is to use different terms for different audiences. After such a long struggle to get harm reduction accepted on the consumption side, it would be a mistake to start a similar process on the supply side. He advocated using caution and in certain audiences, to focus on looking at best practices and good examples of how to apply the concept in policy practice, noting that harm reduction on the consumption side developed out of practical, on-the-ground experiences and the same is likely to occur on the supply side.

In terms of how to continue this process, he reiterated the richness of the discussion and the value of hearing from all different angles, especially from law enforcement, and of surveying the state of the art at the moment. However, on the production side research and examples are still lacking. One of the logical next steps—apart from continuing ongoing research and finding moments of debate—is to put effort into linking this thinking with the alternative development discussion, particularly in light of the effort to develop UN Guiding Principles on Alternative Development. He also noted the lack of good reading materials that provide a comprehensive overview of supply-oriented harm reduction. Hence, another good next step would be the development and dissemination of a discussion paper that lays out systematically the harms to be addressed and the interventions to be implemented, as well as concrete examples of applying harm reduction to the supply side. This would be a useful tool to use in international harm reduction conferences and other international forums. The workshop concluded with a commitment by WOLA and TNI to take that next step and produce a discussion paper on supply-oriented harm reduction.

Annex

Suggested Readings

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