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The War on Drugs Is a Failure

We should focus instead on reducing harm to users and on tackling organized crime.

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The war on drugs has failed. And it's high time to replace an ineffective strategy with more humane and efficient drug policies. This is the central message of the report by the Latin American Commission on Drugs and Democracy we presented to the public recently in Rio de Janeiro.

Prohibitionist policies based on eradication, interdiction and criminalization of consumption simply haven't worked. Violence and the organized crime associated with the narcotics trade remain critical problems in our countries. Latin America remains the world's largest exporter of cocaine and cannabis, and is fast becoming a major supplier of opium and heroin. Today, we are further than ever from the goal of eradicating drugs.

Over the last 30 years, Colombia implemented all conceivable measures to fight the drug trade in a massive effort where the benefits were not proportional to the resources invested. Despite the country's achievements in lowering levels of violence and crime, the areas of illegal cultivation are again expanding. In Mexico -- another epicenter of drug trafficking -- narcotics-related violence has claimed more than 5,000 lives in the past year alone.

The revision of U.S.-inspired drug policies is urgent in light of the rising levels of violence and corruption associated with narcotics. The alarming power of the drug cartels is leading to a criminalization of politics and a politicization of crime. And the corruption of the judicial and political system is undermining the foundations of democracy in several Latin American countries.

The first step in the search for alternative solutions is to acknowledge the disastrous consequences of current policies. Next, we must shatter the taboos that inhibit public debate about drugs in our societies. Antinarcotic policies are firmly rooted in prejudices and fears that sometimes bear little relation to reality. The association of drugs with crime segregates addicts in closed circles where they become even more exposed to organized crime.

In order to drastically reduce the harm caused by narcotics, the long-term solution is to reduce demand for drugs in the main consumer countries. To move in this direction, it is essential to differentiate among illicit substances according to the harm they inflict on people's health, and the harm drugs cause to the social fabric.

In this spirit, we propose a paradigm shift in drug policies based on three guiding principles: Reduce the harm caused by drugs, decrease drug consumption through education, and aggressively combat organized crime. To translate this new paradigm into action we must start by changing the status of addicts from drug buyers in the illegal market to patients cared for by the public-health system.

We also propose the careful evaluation, from a public-health standpoint, of the possibility of decriminalizing the possession of cannabis for personal use. Cannabis is by far the most widely used drug in Latin America, and we acknowledge that its consumption has an adverse impact on health. But the available empirical evidence shows that the hazards caused by cannabis are similar to the harm caused by alcohol or tobacco.

If we want to effectively curb drug use, we should look to the campaign against tobacco consumption. The success of this campaign illustrates the effectiveness of prevention campaigns based on clear language and arguments consistent with individual experience. Likewise, statements by former addicts about the dangers of drugs will be far more compelling to current users than threats of repression or virtuous exhortations against drug use.

Such educational campaigns must be targeted at youth, by far the largest contingent of users and of those killed in the drug wars. The campaigns should also stress each person's responsibility toward the rising violence and corruption associated with the narcotics trade. By treating consumption as a matter of public health, we will enable police to focus their efforts on the critical issue: the fight against organized crime.

A growing number of political, civic and cultural leaders, mindful of the failure of our current drug policy, have publicly called for a major policy shift. Creating alternative policies is the task of many: educators, health professionals, spiritual leaders and policy makers. Each country's search for new policies must be consistent with its history and culture. But to be effective, the new paradigm must focus on health and education -- not repression.

Drugs are a threat that cuts across borders, which is why Latin America must establish dialogue with the United States and the European Union to develop workable alternatives to the war on drugs. Both the U.S. and the EU share responsibility for the problems faced by our countries, since their domestic markets are the main consumers of the drugs produced in Latin America.

The inauguration of President Barack Obama presents a unique opportunity for Latin America and the U.S. to engage in a substantive dialogue on issues of common concern, such as the reduction of domestic consumption and the control of arms sales, especially across the U.S.-Mexico border. Latin America should also pursue dialogue with the EU, asking European countries to renew their commitment to the reduction of domestic consumption and learning from their experiences with reducing the health hazards caused by drugs.

The time to act is now, and the way forward lies in strengthening partnerships to deal with a global problem that affects us all.

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