Green Paper on the role of civil society in drugs policy in the EU

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PURPOSE: to present a Green Paper on the role of Civil Society in Drugs Policy in the EU.

BACKGROUND: the production and consumption of illicit drugs has a direct impact on disease, crime, corruption, political and social instability. It erodes the many values that ordinary people take for granted as part of their dignified and secure life. As such illicit drugs is one of the gravest problems facing governments and society world wide.

CONTENT: the main objective of this Green Paper, therefore, is to explore ways in which those involved in, and concerned by, drugs policy can work closer with the EU as set out in the EU Action Plan on Drugs (2005-2008). The Green Paper focuses, in particular, though not exclusively, on the role that civil society can play in reducing the use of illicit drugs.

Opinion Polls indicate that drugs are seen as a key EU responsibility. Indeed, since the 1990's the EU has been developing Drug Strategies that are supported by a series of Action Plans. The present "Drug Strategy" (2005-2012) is supported by an "Action Plan" (2005-2008). The EU Drugs Strategy reflects the fundamental principles of the European model on drugs, namely a balanced, integrated and multidisciplinary approach in which action against drug supply and on reducing demand for drugs are seen as mutually supportive and equally important. It is considered an integral part of the Hague Programme, the purpose of which is to strengthen freedom, security and justice in the EU. Further the EU Drugs Strategy seeks to achieve high levels of health protection social cohesion and public security.

The 2005-2008 Action Plan on Drugs, on the other hand, specifically seeks to strengthen the involvement of civil society in fighting drugs and asks the Commission « to issue a Green Paper on ways to effectively cooperate with civil society. » This Green Paper has been prepared following an extensive consultation process.

Civil Society

There is no commonly accepted definition of « civil society ». The Commission has often used the term to refer to a broad range of organisations representing both social and economic players. However, for the purpose of this Green Paper a narrower concept is applied namely the definition suggested by the Council' s Horizontal Drugs Group : « the associational life operating in the space between the state and market, including individual participation, and the activities of non-governmental, voluntary and community organisations. » It also covers those individual citizens who clearly make a significant commitment or contribution to society in a particular field. The Member States also play an important role in organising civil society's participation in drugs debate.

The Union's Legal and Policy Framework on Drugs

Although an official common drugs policy does not yet exist there is, nevertheless, an EU common approach to Drugs. Further, certain legal provisions in the Treaties give a clear basis for European action to complement what is being done at the national level. For example, in the field of money laundering, the trade of drug precursors and the protection of public health. Moreover, Title VI of the TEU calls for

further cooperation in creating an area of freedom, security and justice that includes actions against the use of illicit drugs. Examples of EU legislation include a Framework Decision on drug trafficking and a Council Decision on new Psychoactive Substances.

Civil society in the drugs field

There are many reasons why the EU should be involved with civil organisations working on drugs. Their active participation on formulating drugs policy helps to improve the policy outcome. Civil society, however, frequently views the EU as a distant entity. Further, civil organisations often lack the infrastructure and knowledge to be active at a European level – this in spite of the fact that it is they who bear considerable responsibility for implementing, at a local level, the sort of actions stemming from the EU Action plan on Drugs. This is particularly so for drug prevention, treatment and the rehabilitation of drug users. The Commission recognises that NGO's and voluntary groups of various kinds are good at developing innovative approaches based on a realistic picture of what is actually needed. Nor should their role is drug demand reduction be underestimated. Many of the organisations involved in tackling drugs have considerable experience in working with drugs in other countries through their extensive networks.

The way forward : Different options

Following a 2006 Conference with civil society, the Commission noted that the overriding concern of civil society is to have a permanent, structured dialogue with the Commission. The Commission, therefore, now proposes two ways in which to organise such a dialogue. Firstly, a Civil Society Forum on drugs and secondly, a thematic linking of existing networks.

Civil Society Forum on Drugs

This would be a broad platform for a structured dialogue. To make it manageable membership would be limited. Its objective will be to create a civil society assembly and to act as a platform for supporting policy formulation. Themes for discussion would be based on the EU Action Plan. Representation would be balanced in order to avoid one-sided views. Members would be selected on the basis of an open call, after it has received and analysed reactions to this Green Paper.

Thematic linking of existing networks

As an alternative (or acting as a complement) to the Civil Society Forum on Drugs, the thematic links between the different networks could be strengthened. Numerous networks currently exist that active on drug issues across Europe. These are very effective at sharing information on best practices and effective solutions. Encouraging cooperation by linking networks under common themes might offer an informal, light and cost-effective way to structure information flows as well as enabling a more effective consultation with civil society.

Conclusion : in its conclusions the Commission points out that it has put forward a number of options for a more structured and permanent dialogue on drugs policy between the Commission and civil society. A set of questions are posed including, *inter alia*, the possible strengths and weaknesses of a Civil Society Drugs Forum as well as the thematic linking of existing networks.