

INCB Civil Society Hearing - *“Collaboration in international drug control”*

Good morning, and thank you for giving me the chance to speak today. I am honoured for this opportunity.

My name is Teresa Castro, I'm 30 years old, and I am from Portugal. I'm a social worker, a harm-reduction activist, and a person who uses drugs. Currently, I collaborate with Youth RISE and Kosmicare.

As a young woman who uses drugs, I experience firsthand how the lack of meaningful collaboration in drug control causes harm. I was a daily user of street amphetamine (commonly called speed), and when it became harder to access, I turned to a synthetic cathinone that I can purchase online, which seemed safer because it allowed me to avoid street-market risks. However, unlike traditional substances, it has no long-term studies or safety data, hindering my ability to practice harm reduction strategies. That substance is about to be banned and once again, I'll be pushed toward something likely even less known, more dangerous, and still unregulated.

This is the reality of prohibition: it doesn't eliminate drugs or drug use. It only forces people to navigate either risky and illegal markets, or pushes them to lesser known and unpredictable substances. These are not personal choices, but a direct consequence of policies that are made without the input of those of us who use drugs: either occasionally, frequently, or daily.

In my professional experience as a social worker working closely with marginalized communities of people who use drugs, I have witnessed the impact of prohibition in perpetuating stigma, inadequate care, and institutional violence. It deepens the social exclusion they face and keeps many away from health and social services.

As a Portuguese citizen, I am lucky that the decriminalisation of drug use and possession has been a reality for me for as long as I can remember. However, as much as it is an important and crucial step forward, it remains part of the prohibitionist model, as it does not address the illegality of substances themselves. For all the aforementioned reasons and more, decriminalization alone is not enough to ensure the fulfillment of the human rights of all people who use drugs.

The use of psychoactive substances is not a recent phenomenon: it has existed for tens of thousands of years, across diverse cultures and for many different reasons. Current drug policies have proven to be ineffective in acknowledging this and protecting people from possible harms associated with their use.

That is why real, structured, and funded engagement with people who use drugs and collaboration with peer-led networks and harm-reduction movements is essential and must go beyond tokenism. People who use drugs have important knowledge about drug markets, patterns of use, and community needs, and this expertise must be present throughout the entire policy-making process, not simply addressed afterwards as a formality.

Without this, international drug control will continue to fail the people it claims to protect, and the policies and responses will keep serving those who create and enforce them, instead of those who should be benefiting from them.

Thank you.

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