

Mr. Ban Ki-moon  
Secretary General  
United Nations

Dear Secretary General,

With the United Nations General Assembly Special Session on the World Drug Problem (UNGASS) fast approaching in New York, we seek your enlightened leadership in calling for reform of global drug control policies.

The drug control regime that emerged during the last century has proven disastrous for global health, security and human rights. Focused overwhelmingly on criminalization and punishment, it created a vast illicit market that has enriched criminal organizations, corrupted governments, triggered explosive violence, distorted economic markets and undermined basic moral values.

Governments devoted disproportionate resources to repression at the expense of efforts to better the human condition. Tens of millions of people, mostly poor and racial and ethnic minorities, were incarcerated, mostly for low-level and non-violent drug law violations, with little if any benefit to public security. Problematic drug use and HIV/AIDS, hepatitis and other infectious diseases spread rapidly as prohibitionist laws, agencies and attitudes impeded harm reduction and other effective health policies.

Humankind cannot afford a 21<sup>st</sup> century drug policy as ineffective and counter-productive as the last century's. A new global response to drugs is needed, grounded in science, compassion, health and human rights.

The role of criminalization and criminal justice must be limited to the extent truly required to protect health and safety. Leadership must come from those who recognize that psychoactive drug use is first and foremost a matter of health. Drug control efforts must never do more harm than good, or cause more harm than drug misuse itself.

We are heartened by positive developments around the world since the United Nations last convened a special session in 1998. Evidence-based harm reduction programs to contain the spread of HIV/AIDS and other infectious diseases, treat addiction and reduce drug-related criminality are now underway in almost one hundred countries.

A growing number of city, state and national governments no longer treat drug use and possession as crimes. Some are beginning to legally regulate cannabis for medical and even non-medical purposes. Many more recognize the need to make essential medicines readily available, especially for pain and palliative care in lower income countries. But far greater and more systemic reforms are essential.

We were encouraged last year, Mr. Secretary General, when you urged governments to use the UNGASS opportunity "to conduct a wide-ranging and open debate that considers all options." This, by and large, has not happened – at least within the confines of the United Nations. Your leadership is now required to ensure that the seeds of reform are nourished, not discarded, and that the stage is set for real reform of global drug control policy.