

Appeal for a Worldwide Reading on November 24, 2018* for a new drug policy

The Peter-Weiss-Stiftung für Kunst und Politik call upon cultural and political institutions, schools, universities, NGOs, information centers and self-help groups, the media and interested parties to participate in a Worldwide Reading for the end of the catastrophic war on drugs and for a new drug policy in a plea to decriminalize its consumers and find modern strategies to control access to drugs.

The recommendations published by the “Global Commission on Drug Policy” in 2011 and 2017 should be read and can be found online in multiple languages at <http://www.globalcommissionondrugs.org/reports/the-war-on-drugs/> and <http://www.globalcommissionondrugs.org/reports/changing-perceptions/>.

The “war on drugs” declared by Richard Nixon in 1971 has been lost – a conclusion made by thousands of NGOs, politicians, and scientists around the world, including the aforementioned Global Commission, whose members include, in addition to former heads of state, Kofi Annan and Nobel Prize for Literature winner Mario Vargas Llosa.

The attempts across the world to prohibit and outlaw certain drugs are over 100 years old: During the first International Opium Conference in 1912, an opium convention treaty was signed that went into force in 1919 as part of the Treaty of Versailles. Over the years, more and more psychoactive substances were covered by these treaties. Eventually, at the Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs in 1961, most of the world’s nations committed to legally restricting the availability of narcotics. Exceptions could only be made for scientific or medical purposes. Over 100 years of attempts at global drug control should be enough of a reason to take stock of the situation: What has been achieved? What should, shouldn’t, and can’t be achieved? Who benefits from this prohibition policy, which obstacles stand in the way of regulating psychotropic substances, and how can they be overcome? In their report, the Global Commission on Drug Policy concludes that the prohibition policy has not seen the desired success: Despite global prohibition, drugs are everywhere and easy to access – even in prisons. The worldwide consumption of opiates rose by 34.5 per cent between 1998 and 2008, that of cocaine rose by 27 per cent, and that of cannabis 8.5 per cent. Prohibition stabilizes illegal drug markets worldwide and ensures unbelievable profits for organized crime. Yet, the legalization of the sale of certain drugs could allow for high tax revenues, with which – similar to the legal drugs tobacco and alcohol – awareness and prevention work could be funded. Moreover, taking this step would significantly reduce the illegal drug trade and the criminal activity that accompanies it.

Considering the escalating drug war that is especially visible in Mexico and other Latin American nations as well as large parts of South Africa and Asia, and the drug-induced geopolitical shifts (individual economies are completely dependent on the drug trade), it must be observed that prohibition and organized crime have an impact on large parts of the world. The death penalty is being increasingly used in the fight against drugs: According to Amnesty International, in 2017, 15 countries imposed or enforced the death penalty for drug crimes. Ten of 16 Asian nations issued the

death penalty for drug-related offenses last year. With 264 executions, in 2017 more people were executed for drug offenses in North Africa and the Middle East than in any other region in the world. In the Philippines, the “war against drugs” has escalated since the election of Rodrigo Duterte, who has authorized lynch mobs by the citizens and the police. The number of extrajudicial executions has jumped dramatically. The residents of poor districts are especially affected. Lawyers, journalists, human rights activists, socially or religiously active people, or people who were “simply” in the wrong place at the wrong time have also landed in the state killers’ sights. This makes it obvious that systematic human rights violations and the destabilization of democracy are significant and inevitable effects of prohibition. Recently, in the USA, President Trump has called for the death penalty against drug dealers. How many people still have to die in this drug war, how many people must yet suffer damages to their health as so-called collateral damage?

In the face of the still-growing armament in the “war against drugs” and the attempt to make the populace believe this war can still be won, the question of how much sense the violent confrontations and prohibition make is raised more and more often. Globally, numerous initiatives, associations, parties, and prominent figures are calling for alternatives to the drug control model that is based on criminal punishment, pointing to the many negative consequences of the current drug politics that are dominated by repression.

The global prohibition has mainly resulted in the punishment, stigmatization, and discrimination of drug addicts and drug consumers. They are first and foremost criminals and not people who would need therapeutic help if they were addicted or whose decision to consume certain drugs must be accepted. Consumers of certain – illegal – drugs are excluded from participating in society, they are socially ostracized and exposed to health risks. Criminalization alone leads to people who attempt to live a “normal life” or satisfy their addiction or their recreational consumption finding themselves at the mercy of the authorities on the one hand and the black market on the other. Prohibition results in people being subjected to health risks by laced drugs and to social and legal risks by criminal prosecution. Both risks can be avoided with intelligent drug control policies centered on the protection of consumers and children and a health policy based on scientific facts.

The goal of every drug policy should be the prevention and reduction of damages from the consumption of psychotropic substances, the development of realistic and target-group specific education, and the prevention of the stigmatization of drug consumers. People who consume drugs should thus be equally and fully allowed to participate in and help shape all societal processes, independent of individual abilities, ethnic and social background, gender, or age.

Under this approach, the focus is on the health and social living conditions of the consumers, as well as the restoration of the credibility of all preventative efforts in the face of the debatable prohibition of drugs. But basic societal values are also being threatened; freedoms are being restricted which, to no comprehensible and reasonable extent, are neither connected with the intended aims nor with the “successes” of drug prohibition. Human rights are violated.

Therefore, we should begin to understand and take seriously drug use as a reality of human culture. Drugs fulfill a variety of functions: to satisfy the demands of daily life, to compensate for burdens, to experience pleasure, etc. We should nevertheless lay the focus of health policies and research more strongly on the causes of drug consumption in general and the addiction to drugs in particular: Living and working conditions must be examined and changed with regard to the addiction-causing structures, the health risks of the indeterminable purity of drugs must be dismantled, and people need to be better educated. The prohibition policy, however, stands in the way of an open and honest consideration of the handling of drugs in our society and the background and reasons for addiction.

Drug problems must be handled from a health, not a criminal-political, standpoint. What could first be done is the implementation of national special commissions made up of independent experts that examine the effects and (unintended) side effects of the prohibition policy: What are the costs and damages of prohibition? How do the illegal drug consumers and addicts suffer under drug prohibition? How have liberal values and democratic structures been affected? What other collateral damages can be registered?

Furthermore, we need to decriminalize drug consumers as soon as possible! They should above all be offered consultation and treatment, as is already being done in Portugal. There, handling quantities for personal consumption has not been a criminal offense since 2001 – without Portugal sinking under “drug squalor.” The majority (circa 75%) of the over 300,000 drug-related offenses in Germany, for example, are ‘consumer-related’, meaning they are about quantities for personal use. A rational drug policy is needed that is based on scientific evidence and respect for human rights, instead of the outdated century-old belief in the enforceability of universal drug prohibition.

Make your voice heard! Sign the petition and take part in the worldwide reading! For the drug war to end, consumers of drugs must be decriminalized and access to drugs must be regulated by intelligent control strategies.

If you are able to organize a reading in your location, please write to:

worldwidereading@literaturfestival.com

Prior to November 24, we will announce the planned readings on the website www.worldwide-reading.com and report afterwards.

*On this day, the most important book fair in Latin America this year will begin in Guadalajara, Mexico.