

The 2016 UNGASS meeting and its preparatory activities attracted much attention and energy from the drug policy field. It provided an opportunity for governments and civil society actors to reflect on the impacts of the international conventions on illegal drugs and whether the earlier emphasis on creating a drug-free world is being in any way moved towards or, alternatively, whether it remains relevant and realistic.

A year on, we have taken the opportunity to invite participants and observers to comment and reflect on the outcomes and significance of the UNGASS events and conclusions. Many of the contributors were directly involved in the events and have first-hand experience on which to base their accounts and conclusions. The peer reviewing process frequently gave rise to comments that the texts were clearly written by – and for? – insiders, and presented narratives which adopted a subjective view of the events, debates, discussions and decisions. The editors acknowledge these comments but see them as reinforcing our initial aim of presenting first-hand and insider accounts of how the UNGASS process works; the advances in and barriers to shifts in the international policy-making frameworks; the extent to which evidence and example were recognised in the discussions; and the manner in which some views and voices were effectively excluded from the final “consensus” outcome document.

The papers from Steve Rolles of Transform and Mike Trace from the International Drug Policy Consortium give overviews of the UNGASS process and outcome, and ways in which specific issues continue to need attention and change while others represent progress and shifts in emphasis in the context of the international conventions. They point to aspects of the process which effectively excluded some voices, even nations, from being fully involved in the proceedings.

John Collins considers the lessons for civil society which the UNGASS proceedings provide, with pointers for areas where future activity could be focussed. He suggests that one interpretation of the outcome has been an acceptance of policy pluralism rather than a continued insistence on prohibition.

Dave Bewley-Taylor examines the contexts in which international drug policy has so far operated and the increasing irrelevance of existing aims, looking instead to the use of the Sustainable Development Goals as the focus for future drug policy and the acceptance of the aims and aspirations of the majority of UN agencies’ work, highlighting the increasing isolation of the UNODC targets and metrics.

Chris Ford and Sebastian Saville follow a similar route of looking at desired outcomes rather than failed rhetoric by focussing on the prioritising of health before politics in future international policy making, goal setting and assessment of progress. They do so by identifying some of the challenges which exist, complementing other papers’ proposals for future civil society activity and cooperation.

Khalid Tinasti and Isabel Barbosa detail the way in which individual nations can hinder the acceptance of health and human rights rather than prohibition and suppression as the bases for the international conventions, using the Russian Federation as a case study.

Blaine Stothard draws parallels between the lack of direction in the global drug policy framework and the (currently absent) UK national drug strategy, noting the long periods of impasse, the cumbersome deliberation on small issues and the shift in concerns driven by external pressure.