UNITE Drug Policy Desk

In partnership with the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Drug Policy Reform in the UK

An initiative funded by the Open Society Foundations

Report 2021
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UNITED & APPG DRUG POLICY REFORM DESK

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

INTRODUCTION

In partnership with the UK All-Party Parliamentary Group for Drug Policy Reform, UNITE launched a workstream to develop and advance drug policy reform at its virtual Global Summit in September 2020. Drug policy has been dominated for decades by a repressive, criminal justice approach – the War on Drugs. A move to a more public health approach is long overdue. The UNITE/APPG Drug Policy Desk aims to support and promote the adoption of evidence-based drug policies based on principles of public health and human rights. Guidance from the UN and the growing evidence based on an increasing number of countries provide a strong incentive for reforms shifting the focus of drug policy from criminal justice to public health.

With this in mind, UNITE and the APPG have worked to build capacity with members of parliament, civil society organisations and experts in different fields. The goal was to introduce the drug policy reform debate into the national agendas, promoting progressive alternatives, such as decriminalising drug use and possession for personal use, regulating cannabis supply, and introducing harm reduction programs into the public health system.

METHODOLOGY

The initiative has received funding from the Open Society Foundations (OSF) to cover the first ten months of the project. During the pilot phase, UNITE and the APPG have worked productively together to establish the UNITE desk for drug policy. Both organisations have been able to bring their experience and credibility as bodies of parliamentarians in networking with other parliamentarians. The combined connections and political profile of the leaders of both organisations have been utilised to maximise the visibility and credibility of the network. UNITE has brought its expertise in developing a global network of parliamentarians committed to health reforms. The APPG has brought its experience and expertise in working in the drug policy field.

The methodology used focused on creating networks uniting diverse stakeholders pushing for reform in the priority areas. Operating in a context of restricted travelling due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the approach focused on establishing partnerships with local organisations. While partners contributed with country-specific expertise, the Policy Desk designed, implemented and coordinated the capacity building work, identifying the advocacy priorities and organising activities to increase awareness and appetite among members of parliament for health-based policies. The Policy Desk has also supported the work of local partners with financial and intellectual resources.
TARGET COUNTRIES

Launching operations in January 2021, the list of target countries included Kenya, Zimbabwe, Morocco and Portugal. The activities developed in 2021 sought to promote:

- **Portugal** – Political impact and advocacy for the regulation of cannabis supply for non-medical use.
- **Morocco** – Political impact and advocacy for the regulation of cannabis supply for legal markets and introduction of policies to reduce imprisonment for drug offences.
- **Kenya** - Political impact and advocacy promoting health-based approach to drug policy and alternatives to prison sentences for drug offences.
- **Zimbabwe** – Political impact and advocacy promoting health-based approach to drug policy and alternatives to prison sentences for drug offences.
MANAGEMENT STRUCTURE

The Policy Desk is operated by a Secretariat and overseen by a Steering Committee.

The Secretariat is composed of staff from UNITE and the APPG. The day-to-day operation of the project takes account of the existing governance structures within each organisation respectively. Responsibilities of the Secretariat include:

- Political assessment of target countries
- Consolidation of strategic partnerships with local organisations in target-countries
- Cooperation with regional and international key organisations
- Planning and implementation of activities in the target-countries
- Organisation of workshops and capacity building events with members of parliament in the target countries
- Production, review and publication of advocacy and capacity-building materials, policy toolkits, calling cards, position papers and policy briefs
- Mapping and recruitment of members of parliament in target countries to become part of UNITE’s network
- Engagement with members of parliament in target countries
- Participation in events and conferences
- Preparation of members to attend events and conferences upon invitation
- Monitoring of deliverables and outcomes
- Production of activities report being submitted to the Steering Committee

The Steering Committee is composed of 6 members of parliament affiliated with both UNITE and the APPG. Each of the target countries is represented in the committee. The Steering Committee is charged with advising work plans and overviewing their implementation. During the 10-month period, the group had five online encounters.

Steering Committee Meeting’s calendar 2021:
- January 22, 2021
- March 26, 2021
- May 21, 2021
- July 16, 2021
- October 29, 2021

Drug Policy Desk Secretariat Composition:
- Rebeca Marques Rocha, Policy Officer at UNITE
- Beatrix Vas, Contributing Policy Officer at UNITE
- Eléonor Silva, Executive Director at UNITE
- Frank Warburton, Consultant APPG
- Mike Trace, CEO Forward Trust
STEERING COMMITTEE COMPOSITION

Ibtissame Azzouzi – Member of Parliament in Morocco

Ricardo Baptista Leite – Member of Parliament in Portugal

Fortune Daniel Molokela-Tsiye - Member of Parliament in Zimbabwe

Esther Passaris - Member of Parliament in Kenya

Crispin Blunt – Member of Parliament in the UK

Baroness Molly Meacher - Member of Parliament in the UK
OUR ACTIVITIES

In 2021, the Policy Desk successfully engaged over 189 parliamentarians and policymaking officials from various countries in capacity-building workshops, policy roundtables, peer-to-peer discussions, international conferences, and parliamentary hearings.

Our activities were developed on two fronts:

Country-based work
1. Engaging and supporting parliamentarians from the target countries in the African and European region, as well as engaging and connecting members of parliament (MPs) from additional countries in each region.
2. Organising events with decision-makers to promote the sharing of experiences, lessons learned and best practices of MPs from different countries on topics related to drug policy reform and harm reduction.
3. Increasing engagement between parliamentarians and local civil society organisations. Liaising and bridging new opportunities for partnerships and the consolidation of active and sustainable networks for drug policy reform. Where appropriate, financing joint activities aimed at strengthening these relationships and increasing political awareness and appetite for the project deliverables.
4. Involving global, regional, and local actors to assist in assessing the political landscape and local appetite for policy reform.
5. Gathering data and advice from multiple stakeholders and credible sources for developing timely action-based tools, policy toolkits and advocacy materials specific to each countries’ background.

Global and regional networking
6. The country-based work fed into the wider UNITE regional and global networks, which have involved parliamentarians from other countries in the target regions. The focus is contributing to an increased appetite in the region for driving drug policy reforms based on evidence and focusing on: a) harm reduction and treatment provision; and b) out-of-court disposals for low-level drug offenders. Ultimately, the goal is to equip MPs with the network and the tools for debating drug policy challenges and reforms in their region.
7. Connecting parliamentarians with regional and international organisations, such as the Global Commission on Drug Policy, International Drug Policy Consortium (IDPC), Harm Reduction International (HRI), International Network of People Who Use Drugs (INPUD), West Africa Drug Policy Network (WADPN), Law Enforcement Action Partnership (LEAP), Médecins du Monde, Correlation European Harm Reduction Network. Our work aimed to increase the reach of these stakeholders to positively influence reforms.
8. Seizing windows of opportunities open in the region, the Policy Desk has supported events on drug policy beyond target countries. Representing MPs were sent to contribute as speakers in events taking place at both local and regional levels. For instance, in Lithuania, the Policy Desk has contributed to an official online session for members of parliament aimed to debate decriminalisation experiences and options for the country; and at the European Parliament, it has contributed to the conference "Cannabis and Human Rights in the European Union".
9. The Drug Policy Desk also contributed to events organised by key international organisations such as the 5th European Harm Reduction Conference, the 9th International Conference on Health and Hepatitis Care in Substance Users, and the UN multi-stakeholder high-level meeting.
TARGET COUNTRIES 2021

PORTUGAL

Our local partner: Grupo de Ativistas em Tratamento (GAT)

In 2021, two bill proposals for the legalisation of cannabis for adults were introduced and discussed in the Portuguese Parliament in the scope of the Health Commission. The drug policy desk has been working with a group of experts, CSO, lawyers and key political personalities campaigning in support of cannabis legalisation in Portugal (Citizens’ Initiative for Responsibly Regulating Cannabis in Portugal). The goal is to foster an open, transparent, and informed debate, consulting diverse stakeholders from different political spectrums and fields, as well as experts from countries that have already reformed their cannabis policies.

The Drug Policy Desk’s activities in Portugal aim to contribute to the advocacy campaign mobilising the debate of cannabis reform at the civil society level while building capacity with local MPs for the decision-making regarding the ongoing bill proposals for cannabis legalisation.

Together with the Citizens’ Initiative for Cannabis Regulation, UNITE has produced an Open Letter with principles for responsibly regulating cannabis. The publishing of the letter was endorsed by 67 high-level national personalities in Portugal and continues to gather support from key Portuguese stakeholders.

In October the open letter was delivered to the Health Commission within the Portuguese Parliament, advocating in favour for the regulation of Cannabis for non-medical purposes in the country.
ZIMBABWE:

Our local partner: Zimbabwe Civil Liberties and Drug Network

Together with our local partner, The Drug Policy Desk worked in the advocacy campaign supporting the implementation of the National Drug Master Plan. The plan brings a set of policy recommendations for Zimbabwe, focusing on the provision of harm reduction and treatment services to people who use drugs and the diversion of low-level drug offenders from the criminal system.

The partnership organised its first event for parliamentarians on June 26, as part of the Suport. Don’t Punish Campaign. The event was attended by 17 Zimbabwean MPs, who engaged in a lively discussion about the needs and pressing challenges on substance use in Zimbabwe. Those insights were appreciated by the drug policy desk and addressed in a policy toolkit produced to assist MPs in their efforts for driving policy reform in the Parliament, including a set of policy recommendations.

On August 24, President Emmerson Mnangagwa announced the creation of the inter-ministerial committee on Tackling Substance Abuse Menace Among the Youth. Campaign materials have been produced, summarising the main points on the policy toolkit for sharing via social media accounts and fostering debate among MPs. Later, on September 14, the Ministry of Public Service, Labour and Social Welfare announced a work proposal on Substance and Drug Abuse Among Children, Youth (and General Population).

On September 24, and in partnership with ZCLDN, the Policy Desk organised an online workshop on evidence-based drug policy options for Zimbabwe. The event was attended by 94 members of parliament in Zimbabwe and his Excellency Hon. Prof. Paul Mavima, the Minister of Public Service, Labour and Social Welfare. The list of speakers included contributions from the International Drug Policy Consortium, Frontline AIDS, the APPG, ZCLDN and lessons learned shared by Dr João Goulão, National Drug Coordinator for Portugal. The event also had a solidarity message delivered by his Excellency, President Kgalema Petrus Motlanthe (former, South Africa), sent in a video format in partnership with the Global Commission on Drug Policy.

Online workshop on evidence-based drug policy options for Zimbabwe attended by 94 members of parliament
MOROCCO:

Our local partner: Confédération des associations de Sanhaja du Rif

The introduction of the bill proposal for regulating cannabis supply in Morocco, led to fast developments. To seize the window of opportunity open, the Policy Desk assisted in the visit of representatives from Confédération des associations de Sanhaja du Rif to MPs cabinets. The group participated in a Parliament hearing on April 5.

On May 26, 2021, the Moroccan Parliament voted to legalise the use of cannabis for medical, as well as cosmetic and industrial purposes. The legalisation was confirmed by a second vote on June 16, 2021, after some adjustments to the law proposed by the Chamber of Councillors. Due to general elections, further work was put on hold.

The approved legislation contains 56 articles, a third of which establishes clear rules to regulate this activity which will be conditioned by an authorisation granted by a national agency that will be created for this specific purpose. The law covers cultivation, production, exploitation, export/import of seeds and plants, processing, transportation, marketing, and the export of final products. The authorisations would be granted only in areas indicated in a dedicated decree. They will be issued within the limits of the quantities necessary to meet the needs of medical, pharmaceutical, and industrial production.

Cannabis recreational use, however, is still illegal. Future activities on Morocco will focus on increasing political appetite for further supply regulation, the issuing of pardons for cannabis-related offenders and the inclusion of existing cannabis cultivators in the acquirement of licenses for legal supply.
KENYA:

Our local partners: VOCAL-Kenya and the SDG Caucus in Kenya

The drug policy desk has been working with VOCAL-Kenya and the SDG Caucus in Kenya for the advocacy campaign bringing a set of policy recommendations focusing on the provision of harm reduction and treatment services to people who use drugs and the diversion of low-level drug offenders from the criminal system.

The partnership organised its first event for Parliamentarians on May 26, gathering MPs, members from UNITE and the SDG Caucus. The event was well attended by 14 MPs and CSOs representatives, who engaged in a lively discussion about the needs and pressing challenges in Kenya’s Drug Policy context. There was the proposal to transfer the lead for drug policy to the health committee. MPs also noted how some constituencies represented had widespread cultural use of cannabis – indicating the possibility of county approaches to cannabis reforms.

Following up the event, the Drug Policy Desk developed an advocacy material with ten reasons for decriminalising drug use and possession in Kenya, supporting VOCAL-Kenya’s media campaign asking for the review of the anti-narcotics amendment bill. The campaign gathered substantial support online. On June 22, President Uhuru Kenyatta announced the creation of a commission for reviewing the anti-narcotics amendment bill.

Later on, UNITE members and CSO representatives in Kenya addressed the Global Commission on Drug Policy, inviting the network to mobilize their influential members in the region to urge his Excellency President Kenyatta to reconsider approving the anti-narcotics amendment bill and appreciate the negative consequences the reform could potentially bring to the country. The letter was well received by the Commission, that engaged in the advocacy campaign in Kenya.
OTHER ACTIVITIES

2021 CALENDAR

Beyond the activities developed in the target countries, the Drug Policy Desk has also engaged, organised, and supported a series of other initiatives relevant for strengthening partnerships and promoting the policy reform agenda. A timeline is summarised below:

January:

- The launching of the Drug Policy Desk was marked by the Publishing of three Position Papers on:
  - Decriminalising Drug Use and Possession
  - Reducing imprisonment for minor drug offences
  - Regulating Cannabis Supply

February:

- Collaboration in the Webinar on HCV organised by Treatment Action Group US (TAG), on February 3. Two UNITE members were invited to contribute to the session and share the good practices from their countries. MP Ibtissame Azzaoui, from Morocco and MP Mariam Jashi from Georgia.

March:

- On March 19, The Drug Policy Desk was invited to be speak at the event International Alliance of Clinical and Forensic Toxicologists IACFT’s, a platform for the sharing of initiatives and research on the field of the substance use and policy.

- Collaboration to the Roundtable Discussion on Sex Work and Harm Reduction organised by Médecins du Monde (MdM) on March 23. UNITE and the APPG have contributed by inviting members of their networks to join the session.

- Consolidation of strategic partnerships with Harm Reduction International, The Regulatory Institute, Parametria (Ecuador) and Youth Rise.

April:

- On April 19 UNITE’s member MP Morgana Danielè organised an event in the Lithuanian Parliament focused on sharing knowledge, experiences, lessons learned and good practices on decriminalisation and drug policy. The conference had the contribution of international MPs and experts, and it was aimed to equip local parliamentarians to debate drug policy reform. Later that month, MP Danielè introduced a Decriminalisation Bill in the Lithuanian parliament.

- Also on April 19, the Drug Policy Desk contributed to the conference “Cannabis and Human Rights in the European Union”, organised in the European Parliament. The event had a pre-recorded video message from MP Ricardo Baptista Leite in support of Europeans countries adopting responsible models of cannabis legalisation.
Later that month, the Drug Policy Desk contributed to the Conservative Drug Policy Reform Group (UK), for the review of the report "Twenty years healthier: assessing the national impacts of evidence-based drug law reform in Portugal". Material prepared for Lucy Frazer, Minister of State (Ministry of Justice), by the Conservative Drug Policy Reform Group (CDPRG), to assist in ongoing conversations about refining UK drug policy to minimise key areas of concern, as identified in The Independent Review of Drugs (February 2020) by Dame Carol Black.

June:

- June 6-8 was marked by the UN Multi-Stakeholder High-Level Meeting on HIV/AIDS. UNITE President MP Ricardo Baptista Leite was invited to speak at the event, talking about political leadership in regard to decriminalisation and social enablers in light of Portugal’s policy of drugs decriminalisation.
- On June 8, UNITE member MP Morgana Danielè (Lithuania) was invited to speak at the UN HLM side event “The Right to Rights: How to Get There for People who Use Drugs” organised by INPUD. MP Danielè shared her experiences as a champion for drug policy reform.

July:

- On July 7, the Drug Policy Desk contributed to the organisation of an onsite roundtable discussion at the NAF Conference Centre, Abuja, Nigeria. The program was successful in bringing drug policy to the fore of national discourse. Five UNITE MP members participated in the discussion, showing the growing awareness and recognition of the negative impact of repressive drug policy in Nigeria and the urgent need to adopt a multi-sectoral drug control approach rooted in public health, social justice, and sustainable development. UNITE members in Ghana and Liberia also sent recorded video messages sharing the lessons learned in their countries and extending fraternal greeting.

Policy Roundtable Discussion in Nigeria with UNITE members
November:

- In partnership with Bensther Development Foundation, the Drug Policy Desk developed training materials for drug policy and harm reduction best practices to be used in workshops with security agents in Nigeria. The training materials had contributions from our partners Law Enforcement Action Partnership, West Africa Drug Policy Network and the International Drug Policy Consortium.

- On November 9, UNITE member MP Fortune Daniel Molokela-Tsiye (Zimbabwe) was invited to contribute to the online panel discussion on drug decriminalisation organised at International Conference on Hepatitis Care in Substance Users. The panel had the participation of international experts, decision-makers and representatives of different civil society organisations.

- On November 10-12, UNITE representatives of the Drug Policy Desk participated in the 5th European Harm Reduction Conference, in Prague, Czech Republic. UNITE contributed to the organisation of the conference’s Opening Plenary Session, with contributions from international experts. UNITE President MP Ricardo Baptista Leite (Portugal) contributed as moderator to the session. UNITE members MP Lynn Ruane (Ireland) and MP Mariam Jashi (Georgia) spoke during the panels focused on the future of Harm Reduction and Drug Policy on both Western and Eastern Europe. Two side-meetings were organised during the conference, uniting other members of parliament attending the conference and representatives from World Health Organisation, United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, Harm Reduction International, International Drug Policy Consortium and the Global Drug Policy Index initiative.
CONCLUSIONS AND LESSONS FROM THE WORK

OUR ADDED VALUE

In a short period of time, the Drug Policy Desk has been able to enhance or energise national debates on drug policy and promote exchange between an increasingly diverse group of MPs and a wide range of stakeholders.

• As organisations based on parliamentarians, we have used our contacts and expertise to engage with parliamentarians and to draw in national CSOs, and international experts to engage with national groups of parliamentarians.

• Our events have broadened the parliamentary audience engaging with those having an interest in related fields. For example, in Kenya, we have engaged with MPs from the SDG Caucus, focusing on the connections between drug policy and the SDG agenda. In Zimbabwe, we are building capacity with MPs from Committees sitting in thematic committees focusing on HIV/AIDS, SDG, Health and Childcare and Internal Affairs.

• We have produced high quality materials that have combined expertise in global drug policy issues with local data.

• We have connected parliamentarians with regional and international organisations, such as the Global Commission on Drug Policy, IDPC, HRI and INPUD. Our work aims to increase the reach of these stakeholders to influence reforms.

IMPACT AND RESULTS

The assessment of activities and outcomes indicates successful interventions in most countries. While 10 months was a short time to fully achieve the deliverables first determined, the Policy Desk has paved a consistent road and consolidated the necessary tools for achieving such goals in the future. The initiative has built momentum for the introduction and advancing of drug policy reform into the national agendas.

• In Portugal, momentum was achieved through the Policy Desk, together with the consolidation of a network composed of diverse stakeholders actively promoting the legalisation agenda. Consensus among key political figures and experts is increasing. Overall, the advocacy campaign has been positively recognised by both public opinion and political body.

• In Morocco, regulation of cannabis supply for medical and industrial use has been approved. Partnership has been established for the continuation of the country-based work to advance with further reform.

• In Zimbabwe, an inter-ministerial committee for Tackling Substance Abuse Menace Among the Youth was established. Moreover, the Ministry of Public Service, Labour and Social Welfare announced a work proposal on Substance and Drug Abuse Among Children, Youth (and General Population). Our partner ZCLDN was invited to be take part on the official meetings for a designing a drug policy in Zimbabwe, actively engaging in the design of harm reduction and treatment programs.

• In Kenya, the desk contributed to the ongoing efforts for advancing drug policy reform, establishing partnerships with local networks of parliamentarians and civil society organisations. The initiative has bridged further communication between those stakeholders and mobilised high-level stakeholders in the promotion of reforms aligned with the SDG agenda.