

# DOUBLE DUTCH

When a report into the effectiveness of UK drug policy held up the Netherlands as a shining example of the success of a zero tolerance approach, experts across the North Sea were left bemused.

**Eberhard Schatz** explains the reality of Dutch drug policy.

I was surprised to read that *The phoney war on drugs*, published by the Centre for Policy Studies, is claiming that the Netherlands is successfully tackling its drug problem because of an almost anti-liberal stance towards drug use and addiction. It said: "It is time to abandon the Government's 'harm-reduction' strategy and to adopt those policies which have worked well in countries such as Sweden and the Netherlands: tough enforcement of the drugs laws, the prevention of all illicit drug use and the provision of effective addiction care based on the aim of abstinence."

But a careful analysis of the Dutch drug policy will show, that it cannot be used to argue against harm reduction and for law enforcement measures. In my view, *The phoney war on drugs* is a phoney way of describing our stance on drugs.

Since it was developed in the 1970s, drug policy in the Netherlands has been aimed at controlling and reducing drug-related problems. Policy is designed to be pragmatic, humane, realistic and based on scientifically supported facts. Legalisation of drugs is not a sensible option but on the other hand, neither is attempting to achieve the goal of an entirely drugs-free society – in the Netherlands this is not considered realistic or feasible.

The four pillars of Dutch drug policy in the field of public health are information, prevention, treatment such as counselling and harm reduction. These pillars are corresponding elements and don't exclude each other.

Even if drugs are illegal in the Netherlands, drug users are not regarded as or dealt with as criminals, but as patients who need care and treatment. The use of drugs is not a criminal offence. Furthermore, Dutch law makes a distinction between soft and hard drugs, because of the different health risks.

Coffee shops are tolerated because they are seen as way of regulating the

quality of cannabis, what it contains and how it is sold, therefore safeguarding people's health. The number of coffee shops in the Netherlands has fallen sharply in the last decade. Now only a quarter of municipalities have coffee shops. The CPS report uses this fact to state that "76 per cent of municipalities have adopted a zero tolerance policy on drugs". The reality is that, although shops have closed in the last few years because they attract 'drug tourists' or are in the vicinity of schools, in many areas shops have shut because there is not enough demand or there were never any shops there in the first place.

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Our non-moralistic, pragmatic approach is reflected in the various information and prevention campaigns – such as improving the life skills of young people, the availability of treatment provision and a broad circle of harm reduction measures: starting from pill testing services for clubbers to drug consumption rooms for hard drug users.

At the same time, law enforcement measures are taken to tackle the international drug trade, while there are national enforcement action plans, drawn up in recent years, to deal specifically with ecstasy and other synthetic drugs, cocaine and cannabis. It's important to note that

law enforcement is not used as an instrument to fight drug use as such, but to tackle drug supply and public nuisance within communities and wider society.

We have been providing needle exchange and methadone treatment for hard drug users for decades and we also now operate drug consumption rooms, where people can inject drugs in a clean and safe environment. Yet these measures, seen as dangerously liberal in some countries, have failed to increase our drug problem.

Of the 15 member states of the European Union, the Netherlands, together with Greece and Germany, has the lowest number of problem users for every thousand inhabitants aged between 15 and 64 years of age. The use of cocaine as well as ecstasy and other party drugs such as GHB is stable.

Taking these facts and the basic principles of the Dutch drug policy into account, one cannot consider these policies as either repressive or liberal, but as a proportional reaction towards a specific problem. Treatment, harm reduction and law enforcement are co-exist as part of one system. Measures are taken after looking at the evidence base – without moralistic judgements – using a pragmatic approach.

If one looks at the facts – by comparing drug use data from the Netherlands and other European countries, the US and Australia – there exists clear proof that this approach is not only effective, but respects the rights of individuals and the society.

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For more information see the leaflet 'Drug policy in the Netherlands' at [www.trimbos.nl/default37.htm](http://www.trimbos.nl/default37.htm)