



A VIENNESE WALTZ

When UN member states met in Vienna in March to thrash out a united global policy on drugs, many observers were optimistic that at last public health would be hoisted up the agenda. But, as **Christopher Hallam** reports, the meeting ended in discord and confusion.

At last year's Commission on Narcotic Drugs (CND), Antonio Maria Costa, executive director of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, acknowledged that drug control in its present shape was not 'fit for purpose'. He had also argued that the system should focus more on its founding principle of public health. Costa's statement, along with an increased involvement by civil society such as NGOs, aroused hopes for real change in the strategic direction of global drug policy.

CND 2009 carried an added significance. Climaxing a year-long period of review, insights gained into the effectiveness of present policies were supposed to inform the strategic direction contained in a new 'Political Declaration' and 'Plan of Action'.

Serious political muscle would be attending, too, with the addition of a 'High Level Segment' on March 11-12; the regular CND would take place in the following week. Meanwhile, Barack Obama had ousted from the White House a Republican presidency wedded to 'war on drugs' rhetoric, and encouraging new signals were reaching us from across the Atlantic. The stakes had been raised by the appearance of an EU-funded report by two eminent researchers, Peter Reuter and Franz Trautmann. Their account of the impact of the drug war on global drug markets concluded: "In aggregate...a fair judgement is that the problem became somewhat more severe."

There were early signs, however, that the 10 year review was not going to comprise the thorough re-

examination of core assumptions for which we had hoped.

Ominously, as this year's meeting approached and drafts of the new declaration began to appear, they bore an uncanny resemblance to those of 1998. News came from the Obama camp: while the US indeed seemed set to adopt a less strident approach, announcing its decision to allow federal funding for needle-exchange, there would be no movement on the inclusion of harm reduction language in the outcome documents. Since harm reduction formed the centrepiece of conflict among UN member states, this did not bode well.

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Sure enough, when the final version of the declaration was unveiled, the striking feature was its refusal to include those two little words, harm reduction. Most observers agree that harm reduction interventions have been proven to work. Its tenets form a central policy principle from Australia to Iran, and are built into the EU drugs strategy, although the EU consensus at CND was

broken by Italy following a February intervention in which the Vatican pronounced harm reduction "anti-life".

Nonetheless, the declaration excluded it. No sooner had the chairwoman's gavel fallen, however, than German Ambassador Rüdiger Lüdeking rose to register his country's dissatisfaction. Going further, he announced that Germany would henceforth interpret the "related support services" to which the text referred to mean those practices normally called "harm reduction", noting that a further 25 countries shared this stance.

Predictably, supporters of the orthodoxy issued a rejoinder challenging the German position. Russia warned of dire if undisclosed consequences flowing from this division. In this, at least, it may be half-right. Not only did the group of 26 offer dissent, but in an unprecedented move, Bolivia announced its intention to have coca removed from the drug control Conventions.

The pretence that the global community is united in its response to drugs and to the problems they pose at the dawn of the 21st century is over, and the consensus shattered. If the CND conclusions are a disappointment, the event may yet prove to be a turning point, when the cracks in the facade of unity, long present, became fully and publically acknowledged for the first time.

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