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Controlling The Flow of Drugs Would Help Reduce An International Problem

The battle against drugs internationally can never be won comprehensively. By definition the very nature of the battle is adversarial, and the final eradication of illicit drug use is only attainable through a shift in awareness amongst the populations and subcultures who participate in it. Illegal drug use could be significantly reduced, just as has been done with legal drugs, through community and residential drug treatment programmes and long term public health campaigns which undermine the acceptability, "trendiness" and desirability of drugs.

Alastair Mordey, Programme Director and Head Counsellor at The Cabin, Chiang Mai comments:

"The force of addiction upon addicted individuals is so strong that the prospect of dire consequences, such as arrest, prison or even death, are seldom strong enough to curtail it. Addiction, full-blown, is stronger than any controlling force, as is the motivation of the nihilistic and destructive elements in all of our societies who produce and sell drugs. Like insurgent guerilla armies, they have the upper hand, they do not have to play by the rules and they have little to lose"

Socio-economic Groups

Both addicts and suppliers are often from lower socio-economic groups, which is not to suggest their culpability is less, but only to highlight the compelling forces which drive addicts to medicate themselves, and criminal fraternities to make money and gain power. In the end it cannot be a battle, but has to be an evolution in society brought about by education to prevent addiction, a sophisticated psychological treatment for those already addicted and efforts to raise living standards to reduce poverty, which is clearly a key cause of addiction.

It is undoubtedly sensible for most societies to have controlling mechanisms placed on the flow and distribution of narcotics. Even the legalization of so called recreational drugs like cannabis has caused problems in cities like Amsterdam and London. Amsterdam's liberal drugs laws have attracted addicts from all over Europe, making the centre of the city somewhat insalubrious. Parts of South London which experimented with a softer policy on cannabis possession, found that criminal elements took to the streets to sell with impunity, making the environment intimidating for other citizens.

Public health campaigns and awareness help change trends

If governments could have restricted the availability of alcohol and tobacco in the same way they do illegal drugs, then many of them would probably have done so. As American prohibition demonstrated, this was simply not a practical solution due to the simple fact that a large proportion of the population were already using them and so, when prohibitive attempts failed, the US ultimately turned instead to education. Tobacco consumption has plummeted in the US since the 1960's due mainly to long term public health campaigns and awareness-raising which has changed trends and reduced the social acceptability of this drug.

Alastair Mordey believes that, "A similar approach should be employed with illegal drugs. I am not suggesting that enforcement efforts should be relaxed but they also need to be accompanied by education programmes. Teaching potential drug users about the dangers of drugs, or offering existing drug users assistance to stop can be just as effective a weapon in the 'war' on drugs as the threat of draconian prison sentences. We can significantly reduce illegal drug and undermine the acceptability, trendiness and desirability of drugs through awareness".

Community Development Offers Alternative Income Streams

In Thailand where The Cabin is based, His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej of Thailand has encouraged community development work via agriculture which has opened up alternative income streams and virtually eradicated opium production. If alternative economies are developed like this in South American and Middle Eastern countries, the international supply line could potentially be cut...

Attempting to reduce the supply and availability of illegal drugs should not be the sole focus dictating political policy. At the end of the day, Governments need to look at reducing the actual demand for drugs either by offering effective education to potential users or scientifically and medically proven treatment services to existing users.

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