The Long Road to CND

The Commission on Narcotics Drugs (CND) Fifty-Third session in Vienna, Austria from March 8th–12th 2010 was a key opportunity to build upon Espolea’s & Youth R.I.S.E.’s strategies around drug policy as it affects young people globally. CND is established by the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) of the United Nations, and it is the central policy making body at the UN that makes decision around drug related matters.

It is important to have a youth presence at the Commission, because young people who are involved in the drug policy field need to be visible in showing how bad drug policy directly affects the livelihood of children and young people. We wanted this to be an opportunity to begin some dialogue with national governments to re-imagine what the possibilities could be if young people were able to live in communities where they are not stigmatized, brutalized, and marginalized in a criminal milieu.

We believe countries need to be constructive in involving young people in the decision-making processes that affect them around drug use and policy. We saw this time as an opportunity to hold CND as an entity accountable to its commitment to young people who are most vulnerable in ‘the war on drugs’.

The Plan

Allen Kwabena Frimpong, International Network Coordinator of Youth R.I.S.E., and Aram Barra, International Working Group member from Mexico, and also Espolea’s Project Director attended this year’s CND. Both were able to obtain ECOSOC status to attend this year’s commission through the Global Youth Action Network (GYAN).

The following are the activities we executed while at the Commission on Narcotic Drugs:

- In preparation for CND Youth R.I.S.E. conducted a conference call tutorial overview of the CND process with the International Drug Policy Consortium (IDPC) coordinator, Ann Fordham and 12 young people from around the world.

- Press Release with specific recommendations for CND (available here in English and Spanish).

- Networking with partners and country delegates from Australia, Argentina, Lebanon, Mexico, Sweden, the US and the UK as well as conducting interviews.

- Live reporting through Ustream and taking photographs of the processions to post on Facebook and Twitter.

- Making a statement in conjunction with the Eurasian Harm Reduction Network (EHRN) during the demand reduction section of the CND agenda (Available here in English and Russian).
I arrived at CND Monday evening straight from the airport when the first day of the proceedings were heading to a close, and everyone was dressed in business attire with suits, ties, and binders in hand. I on the other hand was with sports jacket, jeans and sneakers and already felt out of place in this space. While I was being briefed by fellow Youth R.I.S.E. member, Aram Barra, by the proceedings this morning, I was already thinking about what needed to be done for the next day in our set plans for CND.

At the same time while meeting with other colleagues and organizational partners within the Drug Policy and Harm Reduction movement I kept receiving the same messages of “not much change happens at CND” or rhetorical questions like “Why am I even here?” People were either disgruntled or tired of the process.

I didn’t experience frustration until I actually sat and observed the proceedings and I would hear countries say things like, hip-hop culture and break-dancing are to blame for drug use in their country or even stating we should not include poor health as an issue to address in the social inclusion of young people when regarding drug abuse, because “it’s too broad”. The last straw was when Aram and I saw a delegate sleeping. We had no choice but to take a picture.

It was at this point I asked myself, “Why am I here?” Well, I knew this was a great learning opportunity for me to share my experience around the CND process. I got to network and revisit partnerships that the organization has made. While I didn’t feel like we had any direct influence on the resolutions that affected young people, I realize that we were there to educate people outside of those walls and invite them into a process that wasn’t just and fair to civil society participants.

Indeed our time spent holding people accountable in being observers is the very thing we could do as young people in making the process more transparent for the public.
The Commission on Narcotic Drugs (CND) is the United Nations body charged with overseeing global drug policy. However, despite this important mandate, the Commission does not broadcast its sessions or publishes its minutes publicly. Final reports of the meetings are extremely limited and thus it is difficult to know the stand of each government.

But why should this matter to me as a young person? Young people are a key population affected by drug policy around the world, there is a correlation between drug use and HIV and other sexually transmitted infections well documented worldwide and usually there is little or no voice of youth attending the Commission on Narcotic Drugs.

This year, Espolea and Youth R.I.S.E. in collaboration with the Vienna YouthForce conducted an e-consultation to hear the voices of youth around the world. Over 100 young people from all regions of the world expressed their views regarding their country’s drug policy and health services. On this basis were the press release and the intervention in the plenary of the fourth day built.

The draft resolution proposed by the EU, Norway and Thailand (English document here) pursued to “achieve universal access to treatment, care and support for people with HIV, including injecting drug users, by the year 2010.” After a heated discussion on human rights and its relevance to the theme –you can read this discussion here– the Committee of the Whole adopted the resolution.

Among other things, this resolution calls the UNODC, in support of national authorities, to harmonize policies and clarify roles and responsibilities of national entities, including drug control and public health agencies and civil society, who may give support capacity building and resources for the provision of comprehensive prevention and treatment, care and related support services. It also indicates, where appropriate, to apply the technical guide of the WHO, UNODC and UNAIDS to countries, in line with the targets set for universal access to prevention, treatment and care for injecting drug users.

The resolution also calls the UNODC to significantly expand its work with relevant groups from civil society to address the differences in access to services for people living with or affected by HIV, including drug users, to address issues of stigma and discrimination and to support greater capacity and resources for the provision of comprehensive prevention and treatment, care and related support services.

Last, the UNODC made the most categorical statement that it has done in history with regard to the relationship that should exist between human rights and drug control, crime prevention and criminal justice. (Document available in English).

In all, the CND was a good experience both personally and professionally. Its outcomes, while afar from the real needs of young people across the world, demonstrate subtle and fine approximations to significant changes in drug policy. For instance, it is worth noting that the United States became a cosponsor of the resolution on universal access. While at the end all explicit reference to “harm reduction” was removed, the fact that they were willing to support a formal resolution that included support of needle exchange programs and opiate substitution therapy represents a significant breakthrough in drug policy.
Question: How do youth organizations, such as Youth R.I.S.E. use resolutions at the Commission on Narcotic Drugs that have a direct impact on young people, as a platform to address some of the issues that country delegates are not necessarily addressing in the sponsorship of resolutions that are drafted in the name of “protecting young people”?

Mr. Turner: I think that’s both a strategic and a practical question. Strategically, it’s about not only making a statement for Youth R.I.S.E. itself, but working within national delegations in advance when they are talking about for instance, making a statement on drug demand reduction.

How do you express what you are doing to take forward the protection of children in the convention? And even supplying them with some words, people like it if you tell them something that they can use, so working with that.

I think it’s also very important to keep on seeing it in statements. When you have an opportunity to make a statement keep pressing it forward. I will give you an example:

Demand reduction, when I first started working with the Commission, hardly existed. It was biased as an issue to be talked about. It was biased year after year after year, keep on demanding that it was raised, it was discussed that we took it forward. And now the idea of not talking about demand reduction is impossible at the Commission, you just cannot do it. But you need... it takes time for the system, building allies.

When we’ve tried to create what you call the guiding principles on demand reduction, the first meeting we had there were 10 of us, and 4 of us were from NGO’s. The next year we had about 50 and the room was a little small, and after that we could not actually contain people, and we had to include those that wanted to talk about it, so we started to build up the momentum.

See, you just need a bit of building-up of the momentum. It was very frustrating at times, but the momentum takes time. Once it’s moving its like a big wheel, you try and stop it!