



Role of Scientific Community in International Discussions: The Case of World Drug Problem



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Introduction

There is evidence that the use of psychoactive substances between humans comes from ancient times making it almost a natural behavior for humans to look for substances that make them feel physically or mentally better when they face particular situations in their daily life.

In those times, the most common psychoactive substances came from the poppy, cannabis and coca plants cultivated in Asia the first two and in the American continent the third one and they were mostly used for medical purposes the first one and for religious rites the rest of them. Unfortunately, with the years their usage had a deviation to a recreational use that extended rapidly through legal and illegal channels and made an enormous profitable market that benefited not only to merchants but also to governments itself until it became a huge health problem, specially in China, where, by the XVIII century, the recreative use of opium had become part of the culture and economically beneficial to a wide range of the Chinese society while general population was involved in an endless cycle of addiction called the opium chinese epidemic which also led to some armed conflicts (UNODC, 2008).

But it not only affected China, countries like India and many others east and south east asian countries were affected by the illegal cultivation, production and trafficking in opium.

That conjuncture, specially in China, made it necessary for the international community to pose an international agreement about how to address this problem that could have become a general

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worldwide issue affecting negatively to the whole humanity.

World Drug Problem at International Fora

At the beginning of the XX century, many countries affected by the illicit trade of opium had agreed bilateral or limited multilateral agreements to address their particular issues on the subject but it was in February of 1909 when took place the first international conference about drugs, the Opium Commission, in Shanghai after years of discussions and demonstration of pressure from the society, specially from international religious groups, against the illicit opium trade; the involvement of the United States of America after taking control of the Philippines as a colony from the Spanish kingdom (1898) including its high levels of opium consumption and the possibility to export that type of use of the substance to the American territory, and also to the old British government's concern about its links with the greatest opium cultivation country at the moment, colonial India (UNODC, 2008).

The International Opium Commission of Shanghai laid the groundwork for the first international drug control treaty, the International Opium Convention of The Hague in 1912 which stayed inalterable until 1925 when it was upgraded to include cannabis in its scope.

There were other changes and inclusions of the international instruments related to drugs over the next years but it was in 1961 when the international community adopted, in the framework of the United Nations Organisation, the "Single Convention on Narcotics Drugs", which merged the existing drug control agreements and listed some substances to be under international control since then.

Ten years later, the United Nations also adopted the "Convention on Psychotropic Substances" as a response to the increased use of these drugs in several countries and in 1988 the "United Nations Convention against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances" was adopted to attend the security threats posed

by drug trafficking in many countries (UNODC, 2008).

The framework of the current international drug control regime was completed with the adoption of these three above mentioned treaties, totally based in the scientific evidence available at that moment respecting to the harmful effects of these drugs on people's health (UNODC, 2008).

It is also important to say that the relevance of addressing the world drug problem have reach such a high level that almost in every international political agreement organisation or integration initiative there is an instance referring to this subject. For instance, in Latin America, a region affected mainly by the production and traffic of cocaine, countries like Venezuela are covered at different levels by instances from the global system, represented by the United Nations Drug Control System mentioned before, to a regional level, represented by the Interamerican Drug Abuse Control Commission of the Organisation of American States; the South American Council on the World Drug Problem of the Union of South American Nations; as well as other spaces in the Mercosur and CELAC infrastructures.

Scientific Evidence-based Approach in Addressing the World Drug Problem

It was in 1893, that the British government formed a Royal Commission on Opium to inquire whether the cultivation of poppy plants should be prohibited in british India or not, being this initiative one of the first ones where an advanced scientific study was held to contribute to the understanding and assessment of the world drug problem and the search or evaluation of their possible solutions (UNODC, 2008). Although the results of this Commission could be considered as disgraceful nowadays, to say the less, because it gave a bigger priority to avoid the big economical cost that could have meant, for both the british crown and the indian society, the prohibition of the cultivation of poppy plants in India and for denying the moral and physical degradation experienced by its population as a consequence of

this practice instead of to the search of a solution to the health problem of the affected population (UNODC, 2008).

However, as time went forward, the illicit cultivation of opium poppy decreased considerably in India while it increased in Afghanistan to the point that currently that last mentioned country concentrates almost 90% of the global cultivation of opium poppy while India moved out of that record and became one of the principal producers of synthetic drugs, which demonstrate that countries are facing a very dynamic, challenging and evolving phenomenon that must be tackled with wide, specific and specialized information for a better and effective understanding of it.

That is why it would be impossible to address this problem without the essential and invaluable inputs that scientific and specialized professionals bring to the international community in this regard.

For instance, in accordance to the 1961 convention, the International Narcotics Control Board was established as a monitoring body with the mandate of following the implementation of the international drug control conventions and it is mandatory that at least 23% of its members come from the international scientific community through their respective nomination by the World Health Organisation taking in mind their expertise in medical, pharmacological or pharmaceutical sectors (UN, 1961). Also, the World Health Organisation has a principal role on the scheduling process of substances as it is the first instance, as same as States, that could have the initiative to propose the amendment of any of the list, being this the movement of a substance from one list to the other or the inclusion of a new one in any of the lists, based on the scientific evidence provided by its scientific experts about the harmful effects of the substance under examination in respect to human health. Regarding to the substances scheduling under the 1988 Convention, the principal role is assumed by the International Narcotics Control Board, which also makes an exhaustive scientific research about the risks of a potential or current illicit use

of a substance in the process of manufacturing narcotics and psychotropic substances as well as many other useful reports.

Without any of both specialized opinions provided by the World Health Organisation or the International Narcotics Control Board, depending of the case, there is no possibility that a substance could be subjected to the international drug control system, demonstrating also that scientific opinions are highly valuable between politics and negotiators when discussing about the world drug problem.

The above could be considered as a good example of how science diplomacy works on finding consensus between scientific and diplomats, as long as both of them recognize the results and positive skills of the other and use them on their way to achieve a unique and common goal, which in this case is to promote the health and welfare of all humanity.

Another example referred to the effect that the scientific society have had when the international community addresses the world drug problem, understood as a global phenomenon, is the one related to the affectation it has on internal and citizen security.

There have been dramatic cases that stained the conception of the world drug problem as an international security issue that should be addressed mainly by security dedicated entities, like the conflictive situations in Afghanistan and Colombia, the two main countries in illicit cultivation and production of opium and cocaine respectively, where that situation gave a good excuse to particular actors to carry out international interventions that have resulted on the increase of unnecessary violence and deaths in both countries. Fortunately, the insistence of diplomats, negotiators and the scientific community has stopped those pretensions by the moment and had made clear that the world drug problem is a public health issue and that it must be treated in a balanced manner with security ones.

This change on the vision states are looking at the world drug problem has been called "the new approach" in various international discussion at

global and regional levels (OAS, 2013) and have made significant changes around the world, not only because now the abuser of drugs is seen as a sick person rather than an offender, which have made significant changes about the perception of the problem in general society, but also because there have been new experiments around the globe to look for innovative options to reduce the illicit markets of drugs and to reduce the negative effects of their consumption in humans; for example, we see initiatives to legalize the recreational use of cannabis in some states like Uruguay and the Netherlands and some controversial harm reduction measures which have and still require intensive and impartial studies from the scientific society to clear out the effectiveness of those and other non repressive nor violent proposals.

After all the written above, this author considers that it is demonstrated that the scientific community has a determinant role in the framework of the international drug control system with its responsibility (through the work of the specialists of the World Health Organisation as well as the International Narcotics Control Board) to provide precise and grounded reports and information respecting to the proposition of amendments of the lists included in the international drug control conventions but also for their annual reports about the evolution of the world drug problem as well as the one published by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime.

Those outputs supply politicians, diplomats and policy makers with invaluable information for their respective work to address this issue and reach consensus in the different scenarios where discussions are held. But its influence is not only limited to the global system.

As it was said before, there are different instances in regional bodies dedicated exclusively to address the consequences of the world drug problem in their respective scope and it is evident how the delegates of the different countries agree on the importance of a scientific evidence based approach when addressing the world drug problem in these scenarios.

For instance, after the negotiations made by technical experts and diplomats to complete the Hemispheric Plan of Action on Drugs 2016-2020, held in the framework of the Interamerican Drug Abuse Control Commission of the Organisation of American States, references about the role of scientific community are mentioned in four of its five parts highlighting the necessity of collaborative relations between scientific community and policy makers and executors, the fostering of the scientific research in this subject, the proper medical attention of abusers as well as the best way to ensure that illicit supply reduction measures do not interfere with medical and scientific use of controlled substances.

Recommendations and Conclusion

The world drug problem has demonstrated to be an evolving and convulsive issue that, after centuries of existence and more than one hundred years of international control seems to remain almost unalterably. It emerged through the production of traditional drugs obtained from natural plants to use them in religious rites to the current emergence of new psychoactive substances that can be manufactured using regular modern technologies in any small apartment in any city of the world, what represent a renewed and urgent challenge to address for governments (UNODC, 2018).

The role of scientific community in this regard have been crucial to aboard the problem in a scientific manner, as a world health issue more than a security one. It can not be denied that it has different aspects than should be attended with specific and distinguish actions and that some of them are related to citizen security and illicit financial flows but looking at the problem with a general view, it is mainly and clearly related to the health aspects of humanity.

This year 2019 is the target date to the implementation of the “Political Declaration and Plan of Action on International Cooperation towards an Integrated and Balanced Strategy to Counter the World Drug Problem”, adopted by the Commission on Narcotic Drugs in 2009 which

aimed to eliminate or reduces significantly and measurable some aspects of the problem that today look like inalterable. So, this is a proper date to boost the participation of scientific community not only to assess the achievement but most important to identify the challenges that still remain and look for an intelligent, effective and satisfying response to the global society as a whole.

So it could be said that without the participation of the scientific community in the international discussions about the world drug problem the perception we have about it could be a very different than the one we have now and could have involved more dramatic consequences to society than the ones it has had to the current moment. That is why it is recommended that scientific community keeps having an active participant role in the discussions made in the international arena because of its important inputs to understand, analyze, assess and respond efficiently to this sensible matter.

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