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Responding to a Social Emergency: Drug Policy Reform Conference

By **John Lindsay-Poland** ★ FOR STAFF on Friday, November 4, 2011, 11:45am

By Paloma Ayala

Thursday, November 3, was the big inauguration of the Drug Policy Alliance's International Drug Policy Reform Conference 2011, taking place in Los Angeles. People of diverse backgrounds get together here to discuss and present data and testimonies of those populations that have been trapped in a system of unfair laws, unethical politics and a never-ending expensive war on drugs. On its first day, the conference explored a wide range of topics such as human rights, racial profiling and criminalization, health issues, and the reality of the war on drugs in Mexico. This is a clear example of how war on drugs is not only crossing borders, but is a mirror showing how deteriorated the political system is as well as how fragile the social fabric is without ongoing community work.

California Lieutenant Governor Gavin Newsom, former New Mexico Governor Gary Johnson and Drug Policy Alliance Executive Director Ethan Nadelman were some of the public faces that welcomed the audience and encouraged it to exchange arguments on the current policies on the war on drugs. They also encouraged the audience to get involved, to create initiatives, to do something and to transform these issues into a moral urgency—in short, to build the social movement.

Newsom mentioned that California is a state that “has suffered from the consequences of four decades of failure.” He shared that California in 1980 had 25,000 people in the prison system, and invested over 10% of the general fund in the University of California system, and that has dropped to 6.6% now. The prison budget has gone from 1% of general funds in 1980 to 11.2% today. Now the population in prison has reached 147,000 people. “What in the hell are we doing?” he asked in bewilderment.

In 1980 there were a million people in prison in the United States. However, today the population behind bars has reached a total of 2.3 million. In his words, “it’s inexcusable and it’s unacceptable and it is simply not sustainable.”

Pete White is founder and co-director of the Los Angeles Community Action Network, which works with people on LA’s famous Skid Row. White said that Fredrick Douglass “spent 20 years praying for freedom, but it wasn’t until he started praying with his legs that freedom came. So it is clear that we are praying with our legs!” His words vividly sound in my head: “the drug war has failed our communities and families, is draining our collective ability to meet our full social and economic potential. However, for those in power it’s been a smashing success.”

How can we contribute to the ongoing efforts of fighting a system that it is not only abusive but also profitable in order to effectively reach policy makers? White asked. What are better alternatives to educate the different populations regarding this war on drugs? He concluded that with “other human rights violations, such as incarcerating communities, deteriorating infrastructure, denial of treatment, there is no way to win this war, no matter what your perspective is; we must fight to simply end it. African American leaders must emerge from behind the colossal walls of shame, fear and guilt that all but silence

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our moral obligation to protect the health of our families and communities. We must do more and we must do it right now, to ensure that drug addiction is treated as a health issue, not a crime.”

The sessions were very diverse, with titles such as “What’s it going to take to make marijuana legal?”, “Drug sellers as harm reduction allies” and “Changing the system I – Reducing drug arrests and convictions: Strategies to shift law enforcement funds, practices and priorities” or the “Bi-national movement to end the drug war in Mexico.”

This last session examined a connection between the war on drugs that is taking over the lives of thousands of Mexican citizens with how the US is involved in this strategy of war. Military training at the School of the Americas, weapons supply and supporting the Merida Initiative are a few examples of how this war does goes beyond regions and borders. The spokesman for the Movement for Peace with Justice and Dignity, Javier Sicilia, and other panelists explained how the war on drugs in Mexico goes beyond the possession of drugs. They said corruption has penetrated different levels of power in Mexico and that social justice has been trapped in a political discourse that obeys police and military enforcement/punishment versus finding fair and reasonable alternatives to deal with violence. They said this war on drugs has cost the lives of 50,000 people, many of whom remain unidentified.



However, we are no longer talking about “war casualties” as the Mexican president expressed about the victims in Mexico. On both sides of the border, we are talking about people who have a face and a name and a history to tell. We should share the concern that many groups at the conference have expressed in different ways with more energy – this not a war on drugs, this is a war on people. This is a social emergency.

Paloma Ayala is a member of Service for Peace and Justice of Cuernavaca, Mexico, and also of the FOR Task Force on Latin America and the Caribbean.

John Lindsay-Poland's blog

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