How to Improve Meaningful Civil Society Involvement in Drug Policy?

Background:
The inclusion of civil society in the development and implementation of drug policy is widely recognised as being critically important. Civil society can inform and advise decision-makers in different ways: by doing research, by sharing practical experience and by providing policy recommendations. CSI allows early identification and anticipation of problems and trends. Meaningful CSI can contribute to the effectiveness and acceptance of policies – when civil society is involved, popular legitimacy increases.

Civil society is broad and represents a variety of interest, values, perspective and groups and reflect the needs and opinions of all different parts of society.

Civil society plays an important role in promoting the rule of law and accountability. It has a watchdog function, holds politicians accountable and is therefore and indispensable ingredient of a democracy.

Levels of Civil Society Involvement

Figure 1: Defining Information, Consultation and Active Participation
Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) [2001]. Roadmap page 16

Definition:
“Civil Society is the associational life operating in the space between the state and market, including individual participation, and the activities of non-governmental, voluntary and community organisations.” (GREEN PAPER on the role of Civil Society in Drugs Policy in the European Union 2005, Council’s Horizontal Drugs Group 2005)

“Civil society is an arena of voluntary collective actions around shared interests, purposes and values distinct from families, state and profit seeking institutions. The term civil society includes the full range of formal and informal organizations that are outside the state and the market – including social movements, volunteer involving organizations, mass-based membership organizations, faith-based groups, NGOs, and community-based organizations, as well as communities and citizens acting individually and collectively.” (UNDP 2009)
Barriers and facilitators for meaningful involvement

Meaningful CSI requires commitment, input and action from both sides: policy- and decision makers on the one hand and civil society organisations on the other hand. But policy makers might be more hesitant towards this process, and CSOs should be ready and able to fulfil a proactive and leading role in this process.

Permanent and formalised structures can help to establish and maintain a dialogue between civil society and government representatives. These structures should allow for cooperation on a regular basis between civil society and government actors and oversee both the formulation of policy and its implementation. This does not mean that formal civil society structures automatically result in meaningful CSI. In some countries formal structures exist, but they are considered to be very strict and offer CSOs no opportunity for further engagement. Other countries do not have formal structures and yet it is easy to contact and communicate with relevant authorities.

Networking and cooperation between CSOs can support the process of engagement, channel and summarise information and bring people together. Networking and cooperation can also support the formation of coalitions and coordinate common advocacy actions.

Relationships with policy makers can make or break meaningful cooperation and CSI. CSOs are often more involved at the local or regional level, as contacts to policy makers are established and maintained more easily. The more hierarchical and distant the relationship with policy makers, the more difficult communication and involvement will become – often resulting in mutual distrust and a lack of respect.

Sufficient capacities within CSOs are a prerequisite to become meaningful engaged in decision making processes and CSI. This includes knowledge, expertise and experience in the drug field (research, service provision, practical knowledge due to close relationships with PWUDs), but also organisational and strategic skills for successful networking and the development of advocacy strategies.

Lack of knowledge among policy makers often due to the high turn-over of officers in the related ministries. The expertise and knowledge of the previous officers is lost and there is no institutional memory. New government officials are often unexperienced and don’t know the field very well.

Sustainable funding is an important facilitator of meaningful CSI. Funding should not only include service provision, but also comprise advocacy work, networking, evaluation and research. Sustainable funding, support and provision of resources is needed to ensure civil society activities in the area of networking, advocacy and policy engagement.

Ideology versus evidence – Drug Policy is highly controversial and is often influenced by ideology, assumptions, personal opinions, beliefs and values, rather than relying on existing evidence. It is difficult to influence drug policy, once it is not based on evidence, scientific research and good practice.

Recommendations

Engaging CSOs in policy- and decision-making processes is a sound investment and a core element of good governance. We therefore call governments at all levels to support:

- the development of formal policy development and civil society involvement structures and procedures,
- the meaningful involvement of civil society, by ensuring an open and transparent participation process,
- the development of a supportive and safe political and public environment, which allows civil society to express openly views and opinions,
- the provision of sustainable resources and funding to enable CSOs to engage in drug policy development and implementation,
- the key principles for drug policy development, which includes an evidence and human rights based drug policy approach.

Further Reading at
https://csidp.eu/publications/
http://www.civilsocietyforumondrugs.eu/

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