

Letter to the editor

Lessons from civil society? A response to Collins

Damon Barrett

Dear sirs

I was surprised by John Collins' (2017) critique of NGO strategies in drug policy reform. In it, Collins critiques the idealistic, myopic, politically naive and ultimately failed strategies of civil society leading up to the UN General Assembly Special Session on Drugs in 2016 (the horribly acronymned "UNGASS"). As someone who was involved, and as a Researcher, I think a reply is warranted. Two pieces of mine are included in the critique, and I helped develop two strategies leading up to UNGASS, so I feel somewhat justified. The problem, of course, is not the critique of strategies. This is essential and welcome. Many debriefs and M&E processes have been done. The problem is the content of the critique.

From a research perspective, the main problem is methodological. Collins was peripheral to civil society's efforts, so considerable work would be needed as a researcher from the outside to know their strategies. However, in this paper there is no attempt to assess actual strategy documents. No interviews with key players are conducted. Sweeping conclusions are drawn based on selective parts of the debates in which Collins had a stake, based on his own interpretation of the events, and based on historical analysis that is of questionable methodological relevance to the empirical claims made.

The piece falls down on the above points alone in my view, and I am somewhat surprised this was not captured in peer review. But there are also some specific arguments to which I wish to respond.

Collins claims a distinction between what he calls the "progressive school" and the "reform optimists". The accusation is that there were on one side some politically astute pragmatists working on flexibility and national reforms, and "idealists" on the other looking for an unrealistic head-on collision with the treaty system. This is so obviously distorted that I do not know how it can be honestly claimed. Some of the civil society leaders on national reforms and seeking legal flexibilities within the treaties were and still are also those seeking collision with the regime. These are not mutually exclusive. This is why those that bear the brunt of Collins' attacks write mostly about the full range of options open to States. Their advocacy efforts and successes are not credited, which is unfair, and their writings that contradict the narrative are not cited.

In this regard, it is claimed that the initiative across the reform movement was lost due to a preoccupation with US interpretive approaches to the treaties. A blog I co-wrote is cited to make the point. But the entire issue was ultimately marginal to us, taking up little time. That piece was in fact only written because Collins went public in support of what we saw as a very questionable and dishonest stance by the USA. In doing so, the name of LSE was thrown behind the idea, one that carries more weight, for good or bad, than small NGOs. Without this, we may have said nothing publicly. We were responding to what we read as apologism from our "sector" for US exceptionalism and its ongoing ability to browbeat Latin America with the treaties. Ironically, we are the ones accused of myopic strategies and "drug fetishism".

Collins says that "political bets were placed on a chaotic UNGASS producing spontaneously positive outcomes". NGOs are accused of having an unrealistic view of politics and a lack of long-term vision, which his paper seeks to correct. Aside from the obvious hubris of the claim, how can he know what political bets were placed where? He cannot, using the methods employed here. The most generous I can be is that Collins has mistaken messages at certain moments with multi-issue and multi-year strategies.

The UNGASS was a platform, one point in longer and wider efforts. Huge amounts of work went into bringing in new NGOs, speaking behind the scenes with governments and UN agencies, and so on. There were separate lines of advocacy on harm reduction, medicines, human rights, the death penalty, sentencing, rural production, civil society engagement, and the international

system as a whole. While there were disappointments and areas in need of rethinking, many of us achieved a lot of what we wanted from UNGASS. New partners and audiences, a larger constituency of support, new donors in some cases, and, yes, gains in language in the outcome document.

Even then Collins portrays the description of gains as an effort to rescue something from the UNGASS ashes, seemingly in order to match his narrative. But when Rick Lines and I wrote about a human rights “win” at the UNGASS, to which Collins refers to make this claim, it was not a rescue attempt. We had been nurturing exactly that language. It was an actual win of which we and others were proud and looked forward to building upon. Yes, 2008 was an “inflection point” as Collins notes, especially on human rights within international drug policy. Those Collins unfairly trashes as ineffective idealists were all there working to make that happen, looking to a decade down the line when such debates might have gathered in strength and when the relationships we built with delegations through those early efforts could be built upon.

True, we picked fights on politically heated topics at UNGASS, one of which was the treaties. We knew that many changes would not come to pass. We knew very well the political environment. We knew “harm reduction” would not be included. We knew the abolition of the death penalty could not be agreed. We certainly knew that the treaties would not be opened. But sometimes drawing open the curtains on a theatre of the absurd is useful, so long as all are clear on what it is we are trying to achieve by doing so.

In solidarity

Damon Barrett

Reference

Collins, J. (2017), “Losing UNGASS: lessons from civil society, past and present”, *Drugs and Alcohol Today*, Vol. 17 No. 3, pp. 143-4.