



# SOCHUM

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SOCHUM

## **1. Introduction to SOCHUM**

The Social, Humanitarian, and Cultural Committee (SOCHUM), also known as the Third Committee of the United Nations General Assembly, plays a crucial role in addressing global human rights issues and promoting international cooperation. Established in 1945 alongside the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, SOCHUM provides a platform for member states to engage in dialogue on a wide range of social, humanitarian, and cultural challenges. Its work encompasses the rights of minorities, refugees, women, children, and indigenous populations, as well as critical issues like the fight against racism and the promotion of sustainable development. Through its resolutions and discussions, SOCHUM strives to advance justice, equality, and human dignity, working to protect and empower individuals while fostering a more inclusive and just global society.

## **2. Topic: Decriminalization of Drugs and Its Impact on Global Human Rights**

### ***2.1 Introduction to the Topic***

The criminalization of drug use has long been a cornerstone of international drug policies. However, these approaches often lead to severe human rights consequences, including mass incarceration, disproportionate sentencing, and the marginalization of vulnerable populations. In recent years, many countries have begun reevaluating

their stance on drug use, exploring the decriminalization or legalization of certain substances as a means of addressing these issues.

Drug decriminalization shifts the focus from punitive measures to a public health-oriented approach, emphasizing rehabilitation, harm reduction, and societal reintegration. However, this paradigm shift also presents significant challenges. Decriminalization risks creating a perception of permissiveness that could inadvertently increase drug consumption and dependency rates, particularly among younger populations. It may also complicate efforts to hold drug traffickers accountable, potentially enabling organized crime to exploit gaps in enforcement.

## ***2.2 Historical Context***

The decriminalization of drugs has gained traction in recent years as a response to the human rights issues stemming from punitive drug policies. Historically, global drug control efforts focused on strict prohibition, leading to overcrowded prisons and discrimination against marginalized groups. However, growing concerns about public health, addiction, and social justice have prompted some nations to explore decriminalization or legalization. In the SOCHUM committee, this shift has sparked important discussions on balancing drug policy with human rights, advocating for more humane and effective approaches.

### **Key Historical Milestones:**

**Opium Wars (19th Century):** Colonial powers such as Britain and China engaged in conflicts over opium trade and consumption, laying the groundwork for international drug policies.

**1912 Hague Opium Convention:** The first international treaty to regulate drugs, marking the beginning of prohibitionist policies.

**1961 Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs:** A cornerstone of the modern drug control system, this treaty established strict measures against drug production, trafficking, and use, emphasizing criminalization.

**1980s "War on Drugs":** Spearheaded by the United States, this global campaign intensified punitive measures, leading to mass incarcerations, especially among marginalized communities.

**Early 21st Century Reforms:** Countries like Portugal, Uruguay, and Canada began experimenting with decriminalization and legalization, focusing on harm reduction and public health.

### ***2.3 Current Situation***

The global war on drugs has resulted in the imprisonment of millions of individuals, often for non-violent drug offenses. These individuals, particularly those involved in the possession or minor distribution of illicit substances, are frequently subjected to lengthy sentences. This widespread incarceration has strained prison systems worldwide, contributing to overcrowded facilities and insufficient resources for rehabilitation and reintegration.

The criminalization of drugs disproportionately affects marginalized groups, exacerbating existing social inequalities. Communities that are already economically disadvantaged or marginalized by race, ethnicity, or immigration status are often the most affected by punitive drug laws. This uneven enforcement deepens poverty, limits access to economic opportunities, and reinforces cycles of disadvantage. As a result, the criminal justice system perpetuates social inequality rather than addressing its root causes.

The criminalization of drugs leads to significant human rights concerns, including overcrowded and inhumane prison conditions, harsh sentencing laws, and restricted access to essential healthcare services for drug users. Many individuals imprisoned for drug-related offenses are denied adequate medical care, contributing to a worsening of public health issues, such as the spread of infectious diseases, including HIV/AIDS and hepatitis. Moreover, long prison sentences and criminal records can effectively disenfranchise individuals, preventing them from fully participating in society upon release.

In response to the negative impacts of drug criminalization, several countries have begun to move toward the decriminalization or legalization of certain drugs, reflecting changing attitudes toward drug use and a growing emphasis on public health over punishment. Countries such as *Portugal*, the *Netherlands*, *Uruguay*, and parts of the *United States* and *Canada* have adopted progressive drug policies, decriminalizing the possession of small amounts of drugs for personal use. Portugal, in particular, is often cited as a model for successful decriminalization. Since 2001, the country has shifted focus from punitive measures to public health strategies, emphasizing harm reduction, treatment, and prevention. The trend toward cannabis decriminalization or legalization has also gained significant momentum, with several nations recognizing the growing public demand for regulatory frameworks that treat cannabis as a legal commodity rather than a criminal offense. This shift reflects broader societal changes and a reevaluation of the risks and benefits associated with drug use.

Advocates for decriminalization argue that punitive drug laws violate human rights by criminalizing behaviors that are often linked to addiction, mental health disorders, and socioeconomic disadvantage. From a human rights perspective, decriminalization aligns with the



fundamental principles of health, dignity, and freedom from cruel or degrading treatment. Punitive drug laws often deter individuals from seeking the medical care or harm-reduction services they need, exacerbating public health crises such as the opioid epidemic. When individuals are afraid of arrest or stigmatized for seeking help, they may avoid treatment programs, needle exchange initiatives, or HIV testing and treatment, contributing to the spread of diseases like HIV/AIDS and hepatitis.

By shifting the focus from punishment to public health, decriminalization seeks to reduce harm, support rehabilitation, and respect the human dignity of drug users. This approach recognizes that addiction is a health issue, not a criminal one, and emphasizes the importance of providing individuals with the necessary resources to recover and reintegrate into society.

Despite growing support for decriminalization, several concerns and challenges remain. Critics argue that making drugs more accessible could normalize drug use, potentially increasing consumption, addiction rates, and public health risks, particularly among younger populations. Additionally, decriminalization policies are often criticized for lacking the infrastructure needed to support individuals transitioning from punitive systems to rehabilitative services. While some countries have developed addiction treatment programs, many still lack sufficient mental health care, rehabilitation, and reintegration resources, which are essential for addressing the root causes of addiction and social marginalization. Moreover, decriminalization may not fully address systemic inequalities in drug enforcement. In many countries, especially the United States, racial minorities have been disproportionately targeted by drug laws, and without tackling these deep-rooted disparities, decriminalization may not achieve true social justice or equality.

## ***2.4 Subtopic 1: Drug Decriminalization and the Right to Health***

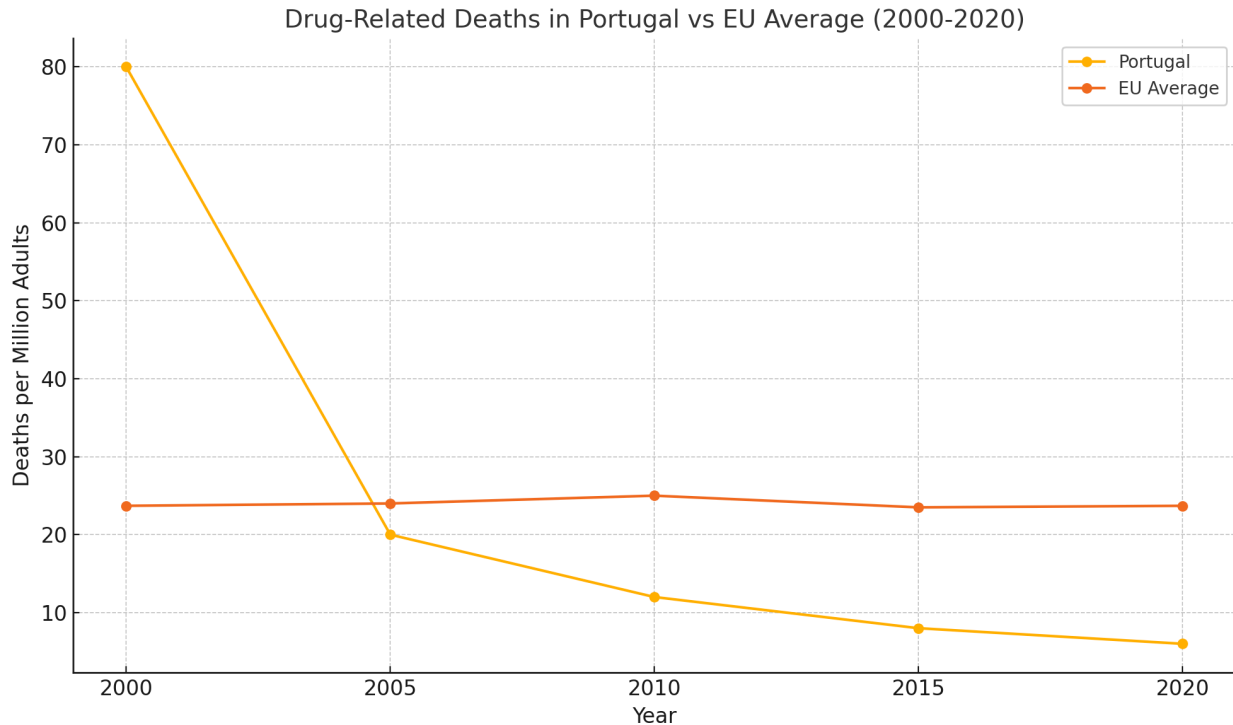
Drug decriminalization is increasingly viewed as a critical approach to safeguarding the right to health, a cornerstone of international human rights frameworks like the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR). Criminalizing drug use often drives individuals away from seeking medical care or harm-reduction services, exacerbating health crises such as the spread of HIV/AIDS, hepatitis C, and overdose deaths.

A compelling example is Portugal, which decriminalized all drugs in 2001. Instead of treating drug use as a criminal issue, it adopted a public health approach. Since then, drug-related deaths in Portugal have plummeted to the second-lowest in the EU, at **6 deaths per million adults**, compared to the EU average of **23.7 per million**. HIV infections among people who inject drugs have also dropped by over **90%**, according to the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA).

Harm-reduction programs such as needle exchange initiatives, supervised consumption sites, and access to opioid substitution therapies (e.g., methadone) have proven effective in protecting the health and dignity of drug users. For example, Canada's supervised injection sites reported that **over 3,000 overdoses** were reversed between 2017 and 2021, with zero deaths on-site (Vancouver Coastal Health).

However, critics caution that decriminalization without adequate investment in healthcare infrastructure may fail to address underlying issues, such as addiction and mental health. A balance must be struck to ensure the availability of harm-reduction programs and the protection of vulnerable populations from substance dependency.





--EMCDDA

## ***2.5 Subtopic 2: Drug Decriminalization and the Fight Against Organized Crime***

Drug decriminalization has significant implications for the fight against organized crime, which often thrives on the illegal drug trade. Criminal organizations rely on the prohibition of drugs to maintain lucrative black markets, which are estimated to be worth \$320 billion annually, according to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). By removing the illegality of drug possession or production, decriminalization policies could reduce the profitability of these markets and weaken organized crime networks.

An illustrative example is Uruguay, the first country to fully legalize and regulate cannabis in 2013. By creating a legal framework

for production and distribution, the government aimed to undercut illegal traffickers and improve public safety. Reports from the Global Drug Policy Observatory suggest that since legalization, Uruguay has reduced the role of illegal markets in cannabis supply from over 70% to 18% by 2020.

However, the results are mixed. In Mexico, despite discussions on decriminalization and cannabis legalization, cartels have diversified into other illegal activities such as human trafficking, extortion, and smuggling. This underscores the need for complementary measures, including strengthening law enforcement and providing alternative livelihoods in drug-producing regions.

International cooperation is essential in this fight. Drug decriminalization policies must align with global strategies to address trafficking networks while respecting human rights. Countries like Colombia have initiated programs to reintegrate coca farmers into the legal economy, though challenges persist due to limited infrastructure and continued cartel influence.

## *2.6 Key Terms*

- **Decriminalization:** The removal of criminal penalties for drug use and possession, replacing them with civil fines or health interventions.
- **Harm Reduction:** Strategies aimed at minimizing the negative effects of drug use, such as needle exchange programs and supervised consumption sites.
- **Legalization:** The full legalization and regulation of certain drugs, allowing for controlled production, sale, and use.
- **Mass Incarceration:** The large-scale imprisonment of individuals, often due to strict drug laws.

- **Public Health Approach:** A framework emphasizing health services and education over punishment for drug users.
- **Drug Trafficking:** The illegal production and distribution of drugs, often controlled by organized crime networks.

### ***2.7 Guiding Questions***

1. How does drug criminalization impact human rights globally, and which groups are most disproportionately affected?
2. What are the potential benefits and risks of decriminalizing or legalizing drugs from both a public health and human rights perspective?
3. How can countries balance public safety, health, and human rights when reforming drug policies?
4. How can harm reduction programs support the societal reintegration of drug users and help reduce stigma?
5. Could legalizing drugs lead to an increase in substance abuse and dependency, particularly among vulnerable populations?
6. What are the long-term societal costs of increased drug availability, such as healthcare burdens and diminished workplace productivity?
7. How might decriminalization or legalization create challenges for law enforcement in combating organized crime and drug trafficking?
8. What role can international cooperation play in addressing drug trafficking while respecting human rights?

### ***2.8 Positions:***

#### **The United States of America:**

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) has highlighted harm reduction strategies in its *World Drug Report 2022*.

While the U.S. remains cautious about full-scale legalization, states like Oregon have implemented reforms inspired by global public health approaches advocated by UNODC.

**European Union (various countries):**

The *International Guidelines on Human Rights and Drug Policy*, published in collaboration with the UN Development Programme (UNDP), reference Portugal as a model for decriminalization, emphasizing significant reductions in overdose deaths and improved public health outcomes. The EU's commitment to harm reduction aligns with the principles outlined in this document.

**Developing Economies (Brazil, India, South Africa, etc.):**

A report by the UNDP, *Addressing the Development Dimensions of Drug Policy*, highlights how punitive drug policies disproportionately affect marginalized communities in developing nations. The report calls for international assistance to help these countries adopt public health-centered approaches.

**China:**

The UNODC's *World Drug Report 2021* outlines China's focus on law enforcement and strict control while also noting some public health measures. China's approach reflects its cautious stance on decriminalization and emphasis on maintaining national sovereignty.

**Russia:**

The UNODC has noted in multiple reports that Russia maintains a prohibitionist stance and highlights the country's resistance to harm reduction measures like needle exchange programs, despite evidence of their effectiveness in reducing health risks.

### 3. Useful Resources

- United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC)  
[www.unodc.org](http://www.unodc.org)
- Global Commission on Drug Policy  
[www.globalcommissionondrugs.org](http://www.globalcommissionondrugs.org)
- World Health Organization (WHO) - Substance Use  
[www.who.int/substance\\_abuse/en/](http://www.who.int/substance_abuse/en/)
- Harm Reduction International  
[www.hri.global](http://www.hri.global)
- European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA)  
[www.emcdda.europa.eu](http://www.emcdda.europa.eu)
- Vancouver Coastal Health (Canada)  
[www.vch.ca](http://www.vch.ca)
- Global Drug Policy Observatory (GDPO)  
[www.swansea.ac.uk/gdpo/](http://www.swansea.ac.uk/gdpo/)
- International Drug Policy Consortium (IDPC)  
[www.idpc.net](http://www.idpc.net)
- Transnational Institute (TNI) - Drug Policy  
[www.tni.org/en/topic/drug-policy](http://www.tni.org/en/topic/drug-policy)
- The Beckley Foundation  
[www.beckleyfoundation.org](http://www.beckleyfoundation.org)

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**World Health Organization (WHO).** *Substance Use*. World Health Organization, [www.who.int](http://www.who.int).

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