Illegal drug use has long been a threat to community and public health. In response, UN conventions (1961, 1971, 1988) were created to criminalise the possession, use, and manufacture of illicit drugs. Internationally, the conventions have been most strongly supported by the US Government since 1971, when President Richard Nixon described the abuse of illicit drugs as “public enemy number one” and formally declared the nation’s “War on Drugs”.

In June, 1998, as part of the further consolidation of the UN’s international drug control framework, the UN General Assembly hosted a special session on illegal drugs under the slogan “A drug free world—we can do it”. The session set out international drug-control strategies and goals for the subsequent decade and reaffirmed support for the existing UN drug-control treaties, which require UN member states to develop national policies based on strict law enforcement.

On March 11–12, 2009, in Vienna, Austria, a Ministerial Segment of the UN’s Commission on Narcotic Drugs will meet to evaluate international progress towards the goals set out in the 1998 special session. This meeting will also prepare the final draft of a declaration aimed at setting international drug-policy goals for the coming decade. Sadly, the biases inherent in the UN’s drug-control system have been well described, and it is questionable whether meaningful change will emerge from this process. If so, this process will only further discredit the UN drug-control regime, given the overwhelming evidence indicating that the War on Drugs has been an unmitigated failure. Under the current drug-control regime, a massive illicit market has emerged, with an estimated annual value of US$320 billion. In some cases, these enormous illegal revenues threaten the political stability of entire regions, such as certain South American countries and more recently Afghanistan. Paradoxically, increased drug-law expenditures have not prevented the growth of this market; instead, a long-term pattern of falling drug prices and increasing drug purity and supply has been observed.

Beyond being ineffective, increasing expenditures on drug-law enforcement have also been associated with severe unintended harms. For instance, in the USA, where the War on Drugs has been fought most vigorously, the incarceration of illicit-drug offenders has contributed to the world’s highest incarceration rate. Mainly as a result of drug-law enforcement, one in eight African–American men aged 25–29 years was incarcerated on any given day in the USA in 2007, despite the fact that ethnic minorities consume illicit drugs at similar rates to other subpopulations in the USA. An additional concern is the consistent association between drug prohibition and increased drug-market violence. A recent example is the upsurge in severe drug-related violence in Mexico coinciding with Mexican President Felipe Calderón’s announcement of an escalation in the fight against Mexican drug traffickers.

Although not independent of the above issues, chief among the public health concerns is the transmission of HIV among injection drug users. According to the UN Reference Group on HIV and Injection Drug Use, the largest numbers of drug injectors live in China, USA, and Russia. It is no coincidence that these three nations also have among the world’s most punitive drug laws and lead the world in the number of incarcerated individuals. This pattern is consistent with WHO’s World Mental Health Survey Initiative, which found that countries with more stringent prohibitive drug policies did not have lower levels of drug use than countries with policies that focused on more evidence-based approaches. An additional concern is drug-overdose deaths, with elevated rates of drug-related mortality more often occurring in settings which emphasise drug-law enforcement over evidence-based approaches to control illicit drugs.

Clearly, the preponderance of evidence shows that the UN drug-control framework has not only been ineffective but has resulted in a range of severe unintended harms. If the UN system fails to acknowledge this reality and open up to more evidence-based approaches during its upcoming review process, it will tarnish the reputation of the entire UN system. It will also help perpetuate the needless human suffering and enormous social costs that have emerged under the existing global drug-control regime.

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The French salt industry in court

In 2008, the French salt industry lost a high-profile libel case brought by its agent the Comité des Salines de France against Pierre Meneton, a medical research worker.1

In 2002, and in 2004, France’s Food Safety Agency and National Academy of Medicine recommended that the population’s salt intake be reduced in line with worldwide dietary guidelines that had been evolving for more than 50 years.23 The Comité subsequently seemed to focus much of its argument against this recommendation towards Pierre Meneton, of the National Institute of Health and Medical Research, who was trying to implement national recommendations for dietary salt intake. In 2001, the Comité des Salines wrote to the