

# The War on Drugs: A Global Perspective

**Gulbahar Singh Sidhu**

Senior Consultant, Department of Psychiatry, Doaba Hospital, Jalandhar – 144001,  
Punjab, India; gulbaharsidhu@rediffmail.com

The relationship between humans and psychoactive substances can be traced back over millennia<sup>1</sup>.

Archaeologists found evidence of opium use in Europe by 5,700 BC, Cannabis seeds in Asia at 8,100 BC. The ancient Greek historian Herodotus reported Scythians getting high on weed in 450 BC and tea was brewed in China by 100BC<sup>2</sup>.

This is a relationship which has many different facets. These include its prevalence, the economic burden and the adverse social consequences.

The menace of addiction has been the focus of policy makers and opinion makers for this very reason. However, the global trends show that the problem does not seem to show any sign of ebbing despite the persistent efforts of the governments around the world to strive for a “drug-free” world.

This raises the moot question as to whether it is possible, in the first place, to have a “drug-free” world. Are punitive laws on substance use a solution? Which are the countries who have managed to keep the drug menace in check? What are the policies that they implemented? Are there lessons to be learnt for other countries, especially, the Indian sub-continent?

The tiny South American nation of Uruguay deserves special mention in this regard. This country was once ravaged by widespread use of cocaine and cannabis. The government, much to the surprise of the world, decided to liberalize the drug laws. This move was criticized by many as it was seen as a decisive step in making Uruguay a haven for drug traffickers. The government implemented the now-famous “decree 14294” which allowed its citizens to avoid prison as long as they possessed less than “a minimum quantity [of illicit substances], intended solely for personal use.” Threshold amounts were not specified for any substance, leaving those decisions up to individual judges. According to the regulations individuals could purchase up to 40 grams of the drug (10 grams per week) with or without a prescription from licensed pharmacies. Handful of commercial growers was specifically approved

by the state and the users could grow up to six female flowering cannabis plants per household for their own consumption<sup>3</sup>.

As a result of these policies, Uruguay boasts of far lower levels of corruption, low levels of crime and a higher degree of effective state presence than other nations in the region, hence re-earning its past reputation as “the Switzerland of Latin America<sup>4</sup>.”

Closer home, Phillipines is one of the handful of nations who have reported a fall in prevalence of substance use in recent years. The prevalence rates have fallen to 2.09% in 2019 which is far lower than the global figure of 5.3% in the same year<sup>5</sup>. This is largely attributed to very meticulously carved out and zealously implemented “School Awareness Campaigns” across the country.

Clearly, the war on drugs needs to be fought on an entirely different ground and with a more liberal perspective. It’s a long-drawn war with no clear winners. What is required is a more humanistic approach.

## 1. References

1. Guerra-Doce, E. (2015). Psychoactive substances in pre-historic times: Examining the Archaeological Evidence. *Time and Mind*, 8(1):91–112. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1751696X.2014.993244>
2. Giorgio, S. (2019). The oldest archeological data evidencing the relationship of Homo sapiens with psychoactive plants: A worldwide overview. *Journal of Psychedelic Studies*, 3:1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1556/2054.2019.008>
3. Decreto Ley N° 14.294, Pub. Registro Nacional de Leyes y Decretos, No. 19396 (1974) (Uruguay), [http://www.infodrogas.gub.uy/html/marco\\_legal/documentos/02-DecretoLey14294.pdf](http://www.infodrogas.gub.uy/html/marco_legal/documentos/02-DecretoLey14294.pdf)
4. See Corruption Perceptions Index 2014: Results, “Transparency International”; <http://www.transparency.org/cpi2014/results>
5. <https://www.ddb.gov.ph/newsroom/511-2019-drug-survey-shows-drug-use-prevalence-rate-falls-to-2-05>