

SUMMING UP MIKE TRACE

The debate on the principals of evaluation in the morning session was very rounded and sophisticated, and the afternoon session concentrated on the European Union Drugs Strategy. Although drafted five years ago, and not without its faults, it did attempt to set outcome objectives and an agenda of how those would be measured. The meeting today falls right in the middle of the reconsideration of the future strategy. The last European Union Drug Strategy (2000–2004) runs out in December. It introduced a lot of good concepts for European drug policy, such as subsidiarity (member states having the primary responsibility for all the actions under the strategy); the integration of activities; a balance between activities targeted at supply, demand and harm reduction; and a commitment to evaluation.

The fashion when the current strategy was being drafted in the late 1990s was to actually set objective targets for a drug policy and measure against them. The position we are in at the moment is that the review of progress against the last strategy has been in the process of compilation but no clear measure of success or failure has been established. The next strategy is in the process of being drafted, and it is of concern that the commitment to evaluating progress in relation to outcome objectives seems much looser than it is in the current strategy. At its simplest and most basic, if governments and international organisations embark on a drug policy without actually asking whether it is achieving a reduction in problems or a reduction in drug use, then what hope is there for measuring the success or failure of the implemented policy?

The summary of the contributions so far has suggested that evaluation is methodologically too difficult; the results of the evaluation will never lead to clear policy advice; you cannot link the results of the evaluations to the actions and programmes that you have invested in; even when you can, politicians ignore your results. In addition to that, I am conscious that asking awkward questions (as Jan Wiarda pointed out) is not good for your career. Putting that together, it is easy to see why people react to that reality by saying it is all too hard and there is no point doing anything. However, I think we should be making exactly the opposite decision at this point in history on drug policy. Evaluation is hard; getting the methodology right is hard; getting the results right is hard; so it relies on those of us with some expertise to work harder and get it right. The other option is to carry on giving no advice to policy makers and allow them to carry on making decisions on the basis of the Daily Mail or its equivalent in different countries, and try and negotiate some very difficult social policy decisions without any signposts. That is not the right reaction to things being hard.

The Beckley Foundation Drug Policy Programme commenced on the basis that there were a lot of people in a lot of sectors related to drug policy, whether it be NGOs, academics, officials or politicians and policy makers themselves, who were interested in promoting and enabling some more textured debate than we have seen in public on this subject. It is impressive that so many people of such seniority have been able to attend, and the detail and texture of the debate can only be positive. We know there are no simple solutions but we are willing to talk about it and here we are in an environment where we are not going to get castigated for that.