

**ECAD Conference  
San Lawrenz, Gozo**

**Opening Speech by Parliamentary Secretary Chris Said**

Distinguished guests,

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is with great pleasure and satisfaction that I welcome you to Gozo, this small island hosting around 30,000 people and opening its doors to thousands of tourists each year.

Finally we're here! What started as a dream - that of hosting the annual mayors' meeting of the European Cities Against Drugs - is now a reality. It wasn't easy, of course, to gather all of you here, and the unexpected volcanic ash saga earlier this year made things slightly more complicated.

Yet, here we are, all enthusiastic to renew our commitment against the use of illicit drugs in our cities and to promote drug-free societies. We are all well aware that it's up to us – governments, mayors, non-profit organisations and other entities, to come up with solutions ... to give our population more options ... and to offer our young generations new challenges and opportunities that can only make the use of illicit drugs – as our youngsters put it – 'uncool'.

The issue of maintaining restrictive and humane drug policies, both nationally and internationally, must remain on top of our political agendas, especially in times when our societies face tough financial challenges. ECAD's task – creating a future with fewer people resorting to drugs is a crucial challenge for the well being of our societies.

The abuse of illegal drugs is a growing problem all over Europe. Various actions are taken by the European Union, the member states and capitals, cities and municipalities to counteract the problems. However, as ECAD has been noting since its launch, more can be done – and more *must* be done – to come up with a common strategy and common goals in the fight against drugs.

Millions of Europeans are affected directly by drug abuse either as drug addicts, parents, relatives or victims of crimes. Drugs claim thousands of victims every year and cause rejection and suffering.

One could describe ECAD's goal of a drug-free Europe as utopian or impossible. However, every step we do in that direction is a small victory for our societies and younger generations.

Comprehensive efforts to combat tobacco are now under way in various countries, including presentation of up-to-date research, bans on advertising, sampling and sponsorship. It is necessary to co-ordinate and intensify the fight against drugs in a similar way. Countries in Western Europe still have good financial means and other resources to prevent and combat drugs and the use of drugs. It is necessary to mobilise capitals, regional capitals, cities and municipalities all over Europe in the fight against drugs and in efforts to use existing resources as effectively as possible.

Amongst the initiatives being promoted by ECAD is the setting up of a drug-political centre where authorities and non-governmental organisations co-operate on various measures against drugs. Such a centre could be a joint venture between the European Union and the Council of Europe to make it possible for a majority of European countries to participate.

One of the most important tasks of such a centre could be to function as a clearinghouse for knowledge and support of research about the damaging effects of drugs on the individual and society. The information could be actively distributed and presented through booklets, seminars and other information activities. Schools could be encouraged to arrange thematic weeks against drugs. Cities could be given financial and other help to start local action groups against drugs and crime. Co-operation between child-care services, schools, youth centres, the social services, police, institutions for child psychiatry and others could be better developed.

Services for drug users in Europe are becoming increasingly diversified and offered as part of an integrated package of care. This can be seen, both conceptually and in practice. For example, harm-reduction and treatment interventions are increasingly linked and offered

by the same providers. Despite widespread recognition of the importance of social reintegration, this remains a poorly developed area, and drug users still experience considerable difficulties finding jobs, adequate housing and developing non-drug-related pursuits.

The European Union is not ignoring the drug problem. In December 2008, the EU unveiled its new action plan on drugs (2009–12), and this was followed, some months later, by the United Nations' new political declaration and plan of action to counter the world drug problem.

The EU drugs action plan includes wide-ranging measures to strengthen European cooperation to curb the adverse consequences of drug use and cut drug-related crime. It is conceived around five priorities:

- \* reducing the demand for drugs;
- \* mobilising European citizens;
- \* reducing supply;
- \* improving international cooperation;
- \* and improving understanding of the drugs phenomenon.

As European cities, we shouldn't stop debating drug trafficking and reviewing legal developments – from penalties for drug trafficking in Europe, national drug strategies and action plans, new data and trends on drug-related public expenditure and developments regarding drug-related research in Europe.

The EU drugs strategy for the period 2005–2012 aims to provide added value to national drug strategies while respecting the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality set out in the Treaties. Confirming the EU's integrated, multidisciplinary and balanced approach to drugs combining demand and supply reduction, the strategy focuses on these two policy fields as well as on two cross-cutting themes: 'International cooperation' and 'Research, information and evaluation'. It also emphasises the importance of making optimal use of existing legal and information instruments and the need to ensure adequate consultation

with a broad group of partners, including scientific centres, drug professionals, representative NGOs, civil society and local communities.

The eight-year strategy forms the umbrella for two consecutive four-year EU action plans on drugs. As was the case under the previous strategy, evaluation is a top priority.

I'm sure that throughout this conference we will have the time to debate these future policies and to come up with comprehensive plans that we could then forward to our cities, both in Malta and in countries where ECAD is represented.

To conclude, allow me to thank all those who have worked hard to gather us here today. My sincere gratitude goes to my team, especially to Johann Attard who did a sterling job, to the Pembroke Local Council, its mayor Joe Zammit and to all members of ECAD's advisory board.

Ladies and gentlemen, I wish you a most wonderful experience here in Gozo. We are proud to have you here and look forward to welcome you yet again and again with your families and friends in the future. I hope these two days of discussions would be fruitful and productive; that new connections are made between Local Councils present here; and that you will leave our island with beautiful memories.

Thank you very much.