Marihuana regulation in Uruguay: What are we talking about when we say regulation?
By: Proderechos-Uruguay

In the last year, Uruguay has gotten used to being on the covers of leading newspapers worldwide. The New York Times, The Guardian and El País are just a few of international media where we have been mentioned due to marijuana regulation. We have also seen our president, José “Pepe” Mujica make formidable speeches on the main problems facing humanity: the depletion of natural resources, consumerism and the intense pace of life have been his favorite topics. However, one might ask: is there an intersection between marijuana regulation and Mujica’s speeches?

We have worked hard to spread convincing arguments among the public and the political spectrum during the long debates in Uruguay regarding the need to regulate marijuana and undertake a change on our drug policies.

We have provided various arguments of general interest to society, particularly focused on public health and safety. For example, we have talked about the separation of markets and the possibilities to remove marijuana users from violent contexts; the weakening of drug cartels; the possibility of investing financial resources obtained from marijuana taxes for prevention campaigns and treatment strategies; the need to have quality-controlled substances; the non-commercialization of marijuana and the need to ban all advertising associated with its sale; on how to bring drug users closer to the health system; on marijuana’s medical potential; on the promotion of scientific research and the possibilities for developing a chain of highly profitable industrial hemp, among others.

The initiative to regulate marijuana’s market is how Uruguay decided to tackle one of the biggest problems our region is currently facing: violence. A structural, multi-causal violence with drug-trafficking as one of its direct social consequences. Drug cartels are today able to exercise such violence as their main mechanism for land appropriation, for winning market control and gaining power. Drug cartels have been enhanced through an imposed prohibition, resulting in Latin America being the principal battlefield in the fight against production and commercialization of substances that are later sold all over the world.

Such drug trafficking has developed in marginal areas, where extreme poverty and lack of opportunities have led too many people to evaluate their involvement with organized crime as a real option to overcoming misery. Drug entrepreneurs profit from the current political situation and take advantage of the sharp and inadequate wealth distribution in the region; they recruit people, regulate a market of billions of dollars and fund other illicit ventures. Ultimately, drug cartels are today one of the greatest sponsors of social inequality, reproducing dynamics of exploitation where some few accumulate an exorbitant wealth while the majority strives to survive.
In Uruguay, despite moving forward with the debate and having closely approved a bill for marijuana regulation, at Proderechos we have begun discussing a new stage in this process: its implementation.

When we began working to transform our drug policy in 2006, we had hardly imagined that today the current scenario would find us discussing what the marijuana production model should look like for our country. From where we stand, as a social organization from the left, we are committed to a model of domestic production that ensures the greatest possible social development. Marijuana, besides being a plant with psychoactive components for its recreational use, it has other high potentials for production. On one side, it creates the possibility to develop an industry related to the production of medical marijuana. Pharmaceutical labs will find in our country one of the few places in the world where they will be able to legally produce the material needed for the medicines they are already selling. Uruguay must be clever to take the opportunity in creating an export industry with a high-added value whose benefits will be genuinely distributed among our society. On the other hand, the development of a manufacturing hemp industry is significantly appealing given the high value of its products in the global economy. These possibilities make us wonder how we want the development of such production chains to be, which will ultimately determine how its generated wealth will be distributed.

Today, we see the development of this production model as an opportunity for change, an alternative to the prevailing models. Uruguay is a country characterized by an extractive and concentrated economy, in which raw materials such as meat and soybeans account for much of the exports.

At Prodedrechos, we see a possibility with the cultivation of cannabis to promote a different economic model that encourages national production, social development and provides an added value to the supply chain at the expense of excessive profits for some few powerful businessmen. We understand the need to promote a model of small-scale cultivation by small family farmers and small producers. In this regard, we aspire to organic crop models, environmentally friendly and sustainable in the long-term. In addition, this will also benefit the users' health.

It is perhaps here where marijuana regulation and Mujica's speeches intersect. The opportunity is to install a model that achieves a better distribution of wealth, a model that guarantees the same opportunities for all individuals to achieve comprehensive human development, which in the end aspires to happiness. Such distribution of wealth is not only between citizens of the same country, but among the world's citizens.
Uruguay presents an auspicious setting to institute an exemplary model for regulating marijuana; a model that could be implemented in other places, while also opening the gap to look into the future in order to advance in the regulation of other substances. For now, we can say enthusiastically that this long process has strengthened the social movement and contributed to the advancement of our society in terms of rights and equality. For a better society is possible, we must keep working.