



18th Ministerial Conference of the Pompidou Group

**Remarks by Bjørn Berge,
Deputy Secretary General of the Council of Europe**

Lisbon, 13 December 2022

Minister of Health for the Portuguese Republic,

Ministers,

Distinguished guests,

Ladies and gentlemen,

This conference coincides with the end of the Group's current and successful work programme –

And marks the beginning of a new and ambitious one.

So, I begin by congratulating the Portuguese presidency and everyone that has played a role in what has been achieved over the course of the past four years.

The programme agreed in Stavanger was born out of a determination to put human rights at the centre of drugs policies –

Recognising the terrible impact that drug use can have on individuals and communities –

And the equally terrible consequences of ill conceived, and sometimes punitive, responses.

The Stavanger programme very much recognised that like-minded countries could come together and contribute to a better overview and understanding of drug policy choices –

Gain new insights from research and practice concerning the use and abuse of psychoactive substances –

And contribute to the sharing of cost-effective approaches that deliver positive outcomes.

Importantly, it supported member states in developing, implementing and evaluating drug strategies that respect individuals' needs and rights.

All of this has generated important insights and positive outcomes.

In particular, of the International Drug Policy Academy launched two years ago –

A newly-created self-assessment tool that allows member states to assess whether their drug policies comply with their Council of Europe and United Nations human rights obligations –

As well as the good work that has been done on drug consumption rooms, about which the Group held an insightful seminar just last year.

I am also pleased that all of this has contributed to the growth of the Pompidou Group's Mediterranean Network, MedNET, which now has 18 participating countries.

Dear friends,

What matters now is that the Pompidou Group looks ahead –

That it harnesses all of the knowledge, experience and expertise that it has built up over 51 years and applies these to the fast-changing environment in which we operate today.

The Group's new statute, adopted last year, is the first step to achieving that.

Not least by extending the Group's mandate to cover addictive behaviours, including the use of legal substances such as alcohol and tobacco –

And new forms of addiction like gaming and gambling online.

As well as reaffirming the need for a multidimensional approach to the drugs challenge –

With policy, practice and science all working together and underpinned by a focus on human rights.

I know this will require further efforts to bring together actors from across our Organisation and whose work interacts with drug and addiction issues.

But we can build upon the good working relationships that are already there with regard to the fight against money laundering –

And combating violence against women –

And what we do together to bring an end to trafficking in human beings –

And in combatting cybercrime –

As well as what we do to support the information society, and addressing issues relating to criminal justice and prisons.

The new, three-year work programme that you are about to adopt today will no doubt enable the Pompidou Group to take new and important steps forward.

It reflects our Committee of Ministers' priorities –

Promoting sustainable drug and addiction policies –

And safeguarding democratic values –

While helping us protect the rights of people who belong to vulnerable and risk groups.

Crucially, the programme also aims to reduce the trafficking of illicit drugs.

I have no doubt you will go on, and bring about further progress.

That progress will be steered by the Pompidou Group's new leadership.

In just a few minutes you will proceed with the election of a new Presidency and Vice-presidency.

It is no secret that Italy and Switzerland will take on those roles, respectively.

And I wish them every success in the months and years ahead.

With the accessions of Armenia and Georgia and, most recently, Ukraine, the Group's membership now stands at 41 member states.

This is an impressive number and at the same time a testament to what has been achieved and what more this group of countries can go on to do together.

Drugs and addictive behaviours are evolving and adapting – all of the time, but so must also our response to it.

They are a feature of every society, and touch all of our lives in one way or another.

So, it is in everyone's interests that governments respond with insightful, effective and evidence-based solutions.

All of you here today in beautiful Lisbon – and the Pompidou Group – will make that happen.

All the best in your important work!

Thank you for your attention.