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The world drug problem: Taking stock and strengthening the global response



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Background Note

The world drug problem has been a growing concern for the international community for over the last fifty years. Three United Nations conventions on drugs (beginning in 1961) and two conventions on corruption and transnational organized crime provide binding obligations on states to take action to control both the demand and supply sides of drug use.¹ They also call on states to address prevention and treatment efforts to reduce drug consumption.

These treaties have placed psychotropic and narcotic substances under international control, regulating the unauthorized production and distribution of those substances. In particular, the production, distribution and consumption of cannabis plants, coca bush and opium poppy as well as synthetic substances and precursor chemicals used in manufacturing drugs have all come under the purview of these international instruments.

Recognizing that the world drug problem remains a common and shared responsibility that requires effective and increased international cooperation and demands an integrated, multidisciplinary, mutually reinforcing and balanced approach to supply and demand reduction strategies, Member States adopted the 2009 *Political Declaration and Plan of Action on International Cooperation towards an Integrated and Balanced Strategy to Counter the World Drug Problem*.

In the Political Declaration Member States decided to establish 2019 as a target date for States to eliminate or reduce significantly and measurably:

- (a) The illicit cultivation of opium poppy, coca bush and cannabis plant;
- (b) The illicit demand for narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances; and drug-related health and social risks;
- (c) The illicit production, manufacture, marketing and distribution of, and trafficking in, psychotropic substances, including synthetic drugs;
- (d) The diversion of and illicit trafficking in precursors;
- (e) Money-laundering related to illicit drugs.

Resolution 67/193 of the General Assembly (GA) decided to convene a special session on the world drug problem in 2016 and mandated this special session to “*review the progress in the implementation of the Political Declaration and Plan of Action ... including an assessment of the achievements and challenges in countering the world drug problem, within the framework of the three international drug control conventions and other relevant United Nations instruments.*” Resolutions 69/200 and 69/201² requested the Commission on Narcotic Drugs (CND), as the central policymaking body within the United Nations system dealing with drug-related matters, to lead the preparations for UNGASS, which will be an important milestone in achieving the goals set in the 2009 *Political Declaration and Plan of Action* by 2019.

¹ The five conventions are: the 1961 Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs, the 1971 Convention on Psychotropic Substances, the 1988 Convention against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances, the 2000 Convention on Transnational Organized Crime, and the 2003 Convention against Corruption.

² Adopted by the General Assembly on 18 December 2014.

The importance of a comprehensive, people-centered and evidence-based approach to drug control has been reiterated by Member States. Drug addiction has been widely recognized as a health problem and national drug strategies have been developed with successful drug demand reduction components that include primary prevention, early intervention, treatment, care, rehabilitation, recovery and social reintegration measures, as well as measures aimed at minimizing the public health and social consequences of drug abuse. A broad range of alternatives to conviction and punishment are applied in appropriate drug-related cases of a minor nature.

The harm caused by illicit drugs on individuals and societies has a significant impact on peace, security and development worldwide, which has been recognized in resolutions by the Security Council and the General Assembly. Member States have emphasized the need to make use of all tools contained in the United Nations conventions on drugs, corruption and transnational organized crime, to combat drug trafficking and money laundering, while promoting international cooperation in criminal matters. States have also highlighted the importance to reduce the vulnerability of local communities to the illicit drugs economy by promoting alternative livelihoods, with particular attention to the special vulnerabilities of women, youth and children.

To steer an oftentimes vivid public debate, in a constructive direction, evidence has to come into play. Starting with traditional indicators, the multilateral drug control system has largely reduced and then contained the annual prevalence of drug use among the adult population (age 15-64) on around 5 per cent or an average 250 million people. Problem drug use is again a fraction of this, 0.6 per cent of the global adult population or somewhat more than 25 million. The health consequences of illicit drug use [nevertheless] continue to be a matter of global concern, as the vast majority of problem drug users continue to have no access to treatment.”³

Drug use does not figure among the WHO top 20 leading health risks, in contrast to the legally accepted addictive substances tobacco (rank 6) and alcohol (rank 3). According to WHO, tobacco contributes to globally 12 per cent of all deaths (2004) among adults aged 30 years and older; whereas alcohol accounts for 5.9 per cent of the deaths or 3.3 million annually. The mortality rate caused by the use of controlled drugs does not figure within the WHO top ranking, with people dying of illicit drug-related casus estimated on about 200,000 a year – each of these victims obviously one too many.

If we look however at the bigger picture using a wider range of indicators, namely at the impact of drugs on security, development, and human rights – especially acknowledging the ever evolving definitions of these terms– then the assessment is more complex. As early as 2009, UNODC made a plea in its World Drug Report for a truly balanced approach (WDR 2009, p. 172) to deal with unintended consequences as there might be:

- The creation of a lucrative and violent criminal black market for drugs of macroeconomic proportions (estimated in the order of \$320 billion a year⁴);
- Policy displacement from health to law enforcement, drawing funds and political attention from public health to law enforcement and security (with costs estimated at \$100 billion a year worldwide⁵);
- Geographical displacement as crackdowns on drug production and trade push them, and with them, crime, violence, and destabilization, to new geographic areas;
- Substance displacement, i.e., switching from a heavily policed drug to a drug with similar effects but less stringent controls, creating new patterns of drug use and markets;
- Criminalization and marginalization of people who use drugs, often amplified through the use of the criminal justice system to address drug use and minor possession. Drug-related incarceration rates are, in many countries, highest amongst young, poor, marginalized populations, often having lifelong – or even, in some cases, multi-generational – consequences on human and social development”⁶.

³ World Drug Report 2015 (Executive Summary), p. 1

⁴ See UNODC report https://www.unodc.org/pdf/WDR_2005/volume_1_chap2.pdf for a discussion of the complexity of estimating the global drug market. The average figure of \$320 is cited on page 143.

⁵ Estimates of the cost of drug-related law enforcement worldwide range widely. The \$100 billion used here is the report at <http://www.countthecosts.org/sites/default/files/Economics-briefing.pdf> , page 3.

⁶ *What Comes After the War on Drugs – Flexibility, Fragmentation or Principled Pluralism*, United Nations University, 2015.

UNGASS 2016 will be an opportunity to discuss all these elements.

The CND has chosen for an inclusive, comprehensive approach to preparations for the Special Session, involving all relevant stakeholders, bringing in a large variety of perspectives to the preparatory process.

The 2016 IPU-UN Parliamentary Hearing will provide a platform for parliamentarians to take stock of the world drug problem and debate how to strengthen the global response to this problem. The underlying questions of this debate are:

1. What are the challenges faced by the international community in the area of drugs control? How can new challenges be addressed in a comprehensive manner, on the basis of the principle of common and shared responsibility? Are countries taking advantage of the flexibility within the conventions to pursue their own solutions?
2. How can the prime concern of the international drug control conventions, the health and welfare of mankind, best be advanced? Based on the evidence, which approaches to demand and supply reduction have proven most effective?
3. How can efforts be strengthened to prevent drug-related crime and violence? How are drug trafficking, organized crime (including money laundering) and corruption connected? How can international cooperation be advanced?
4. The Agenda 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) provide a new people centered framework for development predicated on the affirmation of fundamental human rights. What are the links between drug policy and the SDGs? How do the SDGs enhance the discourse?

This joint event will consist of four sessions with interactive panels featuring members of parliament, civil society representatives, representatives of Member States and the United Nations. The final report of the Hearing, highlighting key conclusions and recommendations, will be made available to the CND as a contribution from the parliamentary community to the UNGASS 2016 preparations.