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**Statement by Prof. Jallal Toufiq, President,
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**Commission on Narcotic Drugs Thematic Discussions on the
Implementation of All International Drug Policy Commitments,
Following-up to the 2019 Ministerial Declaration**

**Challenge: “*both the range of drugs and drugs markets are
expanding and diversifying*”**

23 October 2023

Mr. Chair, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

The challenge of expanding and diversifying synthetic drug markets is a multifaceted issue marked by intricate dynamics intersecting technology, regulation and consumer patterns of use. A vast array of new classes of substances that are chemically engineered to circumvent existing controls is representative of the continually evolving illicit drug manufacturing landscape.

Data show strong growth in the number of new substances used for manufacturing both controlled drugs and new psychoactive substances, with an estimated average of one NPS emerging on global markets each week. This has resulted in NPS now outnumbering internationally controlled substances by 3 to 1.

Chemical engineering offers almost infinite opportunities to drug traffickers for sourcing the chemicals needed to synthesize

known drugs with substances now being developed that bypass regulations be they designer precursors, pre-precursors or NPS. The novelty and diversity of these compounds makes it difficult for regulators to classify them, enforcement to control them or industry to be aware of them.

Regulatory and enforcement agencies face an uphill battle in trying to regulate the production, distribution, and misuse of these substances reactively. The adaptability and flexibility of clandestine manufacturers, who swiftly modify molecular structures to skirt legal controls, necessitate continuous adaptation of domestic regulatory frameworks and increased voluntary partnerships with the industrial sectors involved in their use, manufacture and handling. The current international framework centred around controlling specific chemicals and limiting their diversion is efficient in achieving specific substance-related objectives but is challenged by the rapid evolution of illicit drug markets, where new substances easily replace controlled substances and where online suppliers exploit global next-day shipping services.

The expansion and diversification of drug markets where synthetic drugs continue to be increasingly relevant are intricately linked to the often-overlooked consumer demand. As people who use drugs seek novel experiences, illicit drug markets respond by diversifying ingredients, locations and methodologies, and introducing new substances and combinations that mimic or exceed the effects of traditional drugs. The uncertain composition and potency of certain synthetic drugs present a significant public health

risk. The emergence of potent synthetic opioids such as nitazenes, for instance, has contributed to a growing number of overdoses worldwide. Synthetic opioids are increasingly encountered in combination with other illicit drugs, such as novel benzodiazepines. Understanding consumer motivations, preferences, trends and identifying innovative and effective demand reduction interventions, including prevention and risk awareness, is essential to reducing global demand, market expansion, and to safeguarding health and wellbeing.

The challenge of expanding and diversifying synthetic drug markets is not limited to one region or country. Prior to the establishment of the INCB GRIDS Programme in 2018, there were a mere 285 real-time trafficking incidents exchanged by governments via INCB's IONICS tool, but by 2022 that increased to over 29,000.

The evolution of illicit drug markets is a global issue that necessitates international cooperation, industry partnership and information sharing for both supply-side and demand-side responses. The ease of cross-border movement, the difficulty of detecting emerging substances and the existence of rapidly responsive global supply chains further compound the complexities involved, reinforcing the need for information exchange among law, regulatory and health agencies and the private sector in real-time. Addressing this multifaceted issue requires an international, whole of government approach with voluntary cooperation with the private sector to implement effective practical approaches for managing the persistent growth and diversification of synthetic drug markets.

Thank you for your attention.