

Summary

The manufacture of “designer” precursors without legitimate uses, specially made to circumvent controls, is one of the most important challenges that international precursor control faces in the year that marks the thirtieth anniversary of the adoption of the United Nations Convention against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances of 1988.

The present 2018 precursors report of the International Narcotics Control Board devotes a special thematic chapter to this development; it highlights the trafficking trends observed and gives an analysis of the underlying causes. The review of three “designer” precursors and the recommendation to include them in Table I of the 1988 Convention also show that Governments must be proactive when proposing chemicals for international control.

At the same time, there has been further progress in monitoring international trade and in controlling the 26 chemicals currently listed in Table I and Table II of the 1988 Convention. There are now 189 States parties to the 1988 Convention, leaving just eight States (five in Oceania and three in Africa) that have yet to become parties and thus ensure universal accession. One hundred and thirteen Governments have requested to receive pre-export notifications in advance of a planned export to their territory, and 162 Governments are registered users of the PEN Online system through which they pro-actively inform each other of about 3,000 proposed shipments of scheduled precursors in international trade every month. As a result, there have been few diversions from international trade.

With regard to trafficking in precursors, there has been some decrease in the quality of the data submitted to the Board under the Convention. For 2017, while 120 States parties submitted the mandatory annual reporting form on precursors (form D), the information submitted has, in some cases, been incomplete. This complicates the Board’s efforts to comprehensively analyse regional and global precursor trends, identify weaknesses and recommend remedial action.

There are gaps in the information available on trafficking in methamphetamine precursors in East and South-East Asia, in amphetamine (“captagon”) precursors in West Asia, and in cocaine chemicals in South America. In all these regions, the Board has noted a marked discrepancy between seizures of key precursors and of the corresponding end-products, in some cases for longer periods of time. For all these regions, the assumption is that the illicit drug manufacture is fed by chemicals diverted from domestic distribution channels (with that diversion occurring either in the country of illicit manufacture itself or elsewhere; in the latter case, the chemicals are first diverted and then smuggled into the country of illicit manufacture). There is only partial information available about, in particular, the use of non-scheduled substitute chemicals, which limits the possibilities for effective intervention.

By contrast, the situation regarding trafficking in precursors in Europe and parts of North America is better understood. In those regions, more resources and attention are devoted to chemical control. A significant supply of non-scheduled “designer” precursors, including series of closely chemically-related substances, feeds the illicit synthetic drug manufacture. Innovative tools are being tested to address the situation, such as the “catch-all” clause in European Union legislation and a list of non-scheduled chemicals without known legitimate uses. PICS, which is being used by officials from almost 110 countries and territories, provides a global early warning mechanism for newly emerging “designer” chemicals.

PICS and the PEN Online system have also helped to establish commonalities between acetic anhydride cases that were encountered in 2016 and 2017, when the substance was being diverted on a large scale. As a result, a number of countries have been conducting investigations that have helped to identify weaknesses in national precursor regulations or their implementation, for example with regard to the registration of operators and the proportionality of administrative charges. However, the success

of those investigations is adversely affected by difficulties Governments face in exchanging operational information in a timely manner.

To address the challenges ahead, a two-pronged approach could be considered. On the one hand, it is important to continue to refine existing regulations and mechanisms and improve their implementation. On the other, such an approach would require new ideas to address the growing number of “designer” chemicals, because those do not lend themselves to monitoring in legitimate international trade flows, as they have no legitimate uses and are not traded legitimately. The Board is prepared, within the scope of its mandate, to continue to actively support Governments in their endeavours to limit the availability of chemicals for the illicit manufacture of drugs.