

Foreword

The year 2020 has been challenging like no other in recent history. The coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic has had a devastating societal and economic impact, claiming many human lives, disrupting the social fabric and family lives, and causing further suffering, as patients with other health conditions could not access health services, including for mental health conditions. It has also shown that international collaboration and solidarity are essential for safeguarding health and well-being across our interconnected world. The international drug control system is an example of multilateralism in action: Member States, which have committed to ensuring the availability of controlled medicines for patients in need, exchange information with each other, through import and export authorizations for controlled substances, and with the International Narcotics Control Board (INCB), through reporting on licit requirements for and statistics on narcotic drugs, psychotropic substances and precursor chemicals. This practical international cooperation is key to ensuring that important medicines reach health professionals and patients and that precursor chemicals can be traded internationally for licit purposes while preventing diversion to illicit channels.

During the pandemic, Member States discussed with the Board how best to address the challenges in exporting or importing controlled substances. Member States took action so that licit trade could continue unimpeded despite the international transport restrictions put in place to prevent COVID-19 transmission. With the officials of many competent national authorities required to work from home during lockdown periods, the ability to exchange electronic import and export authorizations through the Board's International Import and Export Authorization System (I2ES) proved invaluable. Based on the learning of the past year, INCB has started, in cooperation with Member States and international organizations, to review and update the Model Guidelines for the International Provision of Controlled Medicines for Emergency Medical Care¹ and to facilitate their implementation so that the international community can ensure the availability of medicines containing controlled substances during emergency and other crisis situations.

The effects of the pandemic are likely to reverberate for years to come. Chapter III of the present report contains an analysis of how the pandemic has affected the global supply chain of medicines, increased demand for controlled medicines needed for the treatment of patients with COVID-19 and disrupted the provision of treatment and related health services for people with mental health and substance use disorders. At a time when precious resources are already stretched, people affected by drug use disorders must not be left behind. Governments must ensure that services for prevention, treatment and rehabilitation continue to be provided. The Board is also gathering data and information on the impact of the pandemic on drug use and drug trafficking patterns.

The pandemic has had a disproportionate impact on the well-being of older persons. However, there is also a hidden epidemic of drug use affecting this population group. This issue is addressed in chapter I of the present report, following previous thematic chapters of INCB annual reports that focused on women (2016) and young people (2019). People are living longer; one of the challenges associated with a longer life is increasing vulnerability to drug use and drug dependence. Drug use and drug-related deaths among older persons have been increasing, as has the number of older persons in treatment for drug use problems. The chapter includes recommendations to improve knowledge of this hidden epidemic and ensure that this often-overlooked population group has access to the services necessary for their health and well-being.

¹World Health Organization, Model Guidelines for the International Provision of Controlled Medicines for Emergency Medical Care, document WHO/PSA/96.17.

The launch of the INCB annual report for 2020 coincides with the sixtieth anniversary of the Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs of 1961 and the fiftieth anniversary of the Convention on Psychotropic Substances of 1971. In a special publication to mark these anniversaries, published together with the present annual report, we review the achievements of the two conventions and examine new and existing challenges that the international community faces in this area. During the Board's 129th session, in November 2020, we met with Member States to commemorate the thirtieth anniversary of the entry into force of the United Nations Convention against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances of 1988 and explored possible ways of addressing the rapid emergence of designer precursors and pre-precursors. That challenge, together with achievements in the implementation of article 12 of the 1988 Convention, are covered in detail in the Board's report on precursors for 2020.²

INCB continues to have serious concerns about the deteriorating drug control situation in Afghanistan and we are continuing to work with the Government of Afghanistan to support its efforts to address the drug situation. Pursuant to article 14 bis of the Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs of 1961 as amended by the 1972 Protocol, which we invoked in May 2018 with the agreement of the Government of Afghanistan, we have recommended to the competent United Nations organs and specialized agencies that technical and/or financial assistance be provided to the Government in support of its efforts in that regard. Chapter II, part D, of the present report outlines several areas that require urgent support by the international community, which have been identified in consultation with the Government of Afghanistan, and chapter III sets out the most recent drug control developments in the country and surrounding region. Afghanistan faces extraordinary challenges and we reiterate the importance of drug control as a cross-cutting issue that should be put at the top of the development agenda for the country. If illicit drug cultivation and production, drug trafficking, drug use and drug use disorders are not systematically and comprehensively addressed by the Government of Afghanistan with the support of the international community, the broader development efforts focusing on promoting sustainable development, prosperity and peace in Afghanistan are unlikely to be effective. This is a broader issue that affects other countries as well and, in chapter III, we reiterate that effective drug control contributes to fostering peace and security. INCB calls upon regional and international agencies and all partners of Afghanistan to accelerate the provision of further support to the country in the areas set out in the present report, on the basis of the principle of shared responsibility.

INCB is continuing to work with Governments to ensure the availability of controlled substances for medical use while preventing diversion and abuse. From December 2019 to November 2020, INCB Learning training activities were provided for a total of 114 officials from the competent national authorities of 19 countries. In addition, 812 officials of the competent national authorities from 101 countries and territories completed online training modules to adequately estimate and assess their needs for internationally controlled substances. Moreover, in 2020, more than 1,000 law and regulatory enforcement officers from 104 Governments and international organizations participated in training on new psychoactive substances and non-medical synthetic opioids under the Global Rapid Interdiction of Dangerous Substances (GRIDS) Programme. Details of these and other activities are included in chapter II of the present report.

Recent regional developments are highlighted in chapter III of the present report. INCB remains concerned about legislative developments in a number of countries with regard to the non-medical use of cannabis and is engaged in a close dialogue with Member States with a view to supporting them in implementing the provisions of the three international drug control conventions and safeguarding public health and well-being. We see a continuing problem with the use of

²*Precursors and Chemicals Frequently Used in the Illicit Manufacture of Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances: Report of the International Narcotics Control Board for 2020 on the Implementation of Article 12 of the United Nations Convention against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances of 1988 (E/INCB/2020/4).*

methamphetamine and synthetic opioids and related overdose deaths, and make specific recommendations to Governments to address the situation.

We continue to call upon Governments to implement the international drug control conventions with full respect for human rights standards and norms. Drug trafficking and drug-related violence should be addressed through comprehensive and balanced measures, and responses to drug-related criminal conduct must be proportionate and respect human rights and the rule of law. The need to better safeguard human rights protections and place people at the heart of drug control policies has played a role in the evolution of the terminology surrounding drug control, and we call upon Governments to examine any drug control terminology that has potentially stigmatizing effects.

INCB is committed to supporting Governments in the implementation of the international drug control conventions through close cooperation and capacity-building. I urge Governments to carefully study the recommendations contained in chapter IV of the present report and to implement them fully for the benefit of their communities. While the recommendations are directed at Governments and international and regional organizations, we also recognize the valuable role played by civil society, particularly in terms of improving the availability of controlled medicines, promoting a human rights-based approach and providing prevention, treatment, rehabilitation and other related services. We therefore encourage civil society organizations to take these recommendations into account in the planning of their activities.

Building back better from the unprecedented challenges of 2020 and ensuring progress towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals will require the international community to work harder and smarter. The mental health impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is yet to be fully seen, and evidence-based prevention and treatment services must be stepped up to stem an increase in drug use disorders and in mental health conditions. The ultimate objective of the international drug control conventions, to safeguard the health and well-being of humankind, is the shared responsibility of us all.



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