

Foreword

I am delighted to present the report of the International Narcotics Control Board on precursors for 2020, the year which marks the thirtieth anniversary of the coming into force of the United Nations Convention against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances of 1988, in fulfilment of the requirements of article 12 thereof.

Insofar as synthetic and semi-synthetic drugs are concerned, in an ideal world, the key to curbing their manufacture could be summarized by a simple equation: “no chemicals” equals “no drugs”. In the real world, however, in the past 30 years, the international community has had to contend with the fact that the chemicals that are used for the illicit manufacture of narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances also have a myriad of legitimate uses for important products and therefore cannot simply be prohibited. The answer lies in keeping a balance – the principle that underlies the international drug control treaties – between preventing the diversion of these substances for illicit purposes and, at the same time, ensuring that they remain available for licit uses.

In the last three decades, the Board’s role in international precursor control has focused on achieving the fulfilment of the goals of facilitating availability where needed and preventing diversion. The Pre-Export Notification Online system (PEN Online) and other tools, such as the databank and the Precursors Incident Communication System (PICS), put in place by the Board, with the wide participation of Member States, have been successfully used to contain the diversion of precursors from international trade channels. Such diversion is, therefore, now increasingly domestic in nature, and thus the Board, along with national authorities, has, in the past few years, increasingly focused on addressing domestic diversion. I would urge Governments to consider making use of the provisions of the 1988 Convention to control the domestic manufacture and distribution of substances included in Tables I and II of the Convention.

The emergence of alternative precursors that are not controlled internationally, including pre-precursors, chemical intermediates and, of late, designer precursors and “masked” precursors, has proved to be a major challenge in the area of drug control, one that has demanded the Board’s attention for some time now. One way to address this issue is faster international scheduling under the 1988 Convention, but the magnitude of the problem and the pace of changes warrants multipronged and innovative approaches. At its session in February 2020, the Board discussed options to address the problem of designer precursors, subsequently presenting them to the Commission on Narcotic Drugs at its sixty-third session, in March 2020, and I thank the Governments concerned for their constructive suggestions, which will help in developing new ways to control these substances.

The coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic that swept through the world in 2020 meant that innovative ways of functioning had to be adopted to remain effective and efficient. Governments responded admirably to ensure that there were no far-reaching disruptions to supplies of precursors for licit purposes. The Board responded too, conducting its activities in a “virtual” or “hybrid” manner, thus turning the crisis into an opportunity to function in a smarter way. The way forward shall inevitably be even more technology-driven – as we already have with the online communication platform PICS and the extensive online training under the Global Rapid Interdiction of Dangerous Substances (GRIDS) programme and the INCB Learning initiative – and the Board will work to further upgrade its tools and systems in order to serve Governments in an even better fashion as they cope with the new realities.

I am grateful to Governments for having supported our efforts during the year and look forward to continued cooperation in future.

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a large, stylized 'C' followed by several loops and a long horizontal stroke at the bottom.

Cornelis P. de Joncheere
President of the International
Narcotics Control Board