

Summary

Article 12 of the United Nations Convention against Illicit Trafficking in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances of 1988 forms the basis of international precursor control. The fact that there are 190 States parties to the 1988 Convention indicates a firm global commitment to the international system designed to prevent the diversion of chemical precursors to the illicit manufacture of drugs.

In March 2022, the Commission on Narcotic Drugs, at its sixty-fifth session, decided to include three precursors of fentanyl and of some related substances, namely, 4-AP, 1-boc-4-AP and norfentanyl, in Table I of the 1988 Convention. That decision, which came into effect on 23 November 2022, brought the total number of substances scheduled under Tables I and II of the 1988 Convention to 33. Ten of those substances, some of them designer precursors with no known legitimate uses, were added to Table I in the last eight years, indicating the increased sophistication of trafficking entrepreneurs in quickly replacing controlled substances with alternative chemicals that are not subject to international control, for purposes of illicit drug manufacture.

With 126 States parties having submitted form D as at 1 November 2022, the level of reporting of annual information on substances frequently used in the illicit manufacture of narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances remained at the previous level. Since such reporting forms a critical basis for the reports of the Board on the implementation of article 12 of the 1988 Convention, there remains an immediate need to improve the comprehensiveness, quality and timeliness of such reporting.

The issue of the use of non-scheduled chemicals for illicit drug manufacture continued to occupy a pre-eminent position globally. A total of 67 countries across all continents have now reported seizures of substances not included in the two tables of the 1988 Convention, indicating the global spread of the problem. With the exception of cannabis, no drug or class of drugs remains untouched by the use of non-scheduled chemicals. With a view to advancing knowledge and generating action at the national and international levels, the Board has developed guidance material and information resources on this subject. The guidance document entitled “Proliferation of non-scheduled chemicals and designer precursors: options for global action” is one such resource. In addition, in order to facilitate the understanding of the subject, INCB created an interactive compendium to serve as a single reference point for INCB tools and resources on the subject of non-scheduled chemicals and designer precursors. Furthermore, at its sixty-fifth session, the Commission on Narcotic Drugs adopted resolution 65/3, entitled “Intensifying efforts to address the diversion of non-scheduled chemicals frequently used in the illicit manufacture of drugs and the proliferation of designer precursors”. The resolution provides a concrete basis for action to address chemicals not under international control, which remains one of the most critical challenges in international precursor control.

The monitoring of international trade in controlled precursors is at the core of international precursor control efforts. The number of Governments formally requesting to receive pre-export notifications for some or all of the substances in Tables I and II had risen to 117 as at 1 November 2022, with the addition of Zambia since the previous year. The data for the reporting year provided more evidence of the effectiveness of the Board’s online platform for facilitating such pre-notification, the PEN Online system. For example, timely action by Jordan on pre-export notifications submitted by Egypt prevented the possible diversion of nearly 1 ton of pseudoephedrine preparations.

As regards trafficking in key drug precursors, the decline in reported seizures of ephedrine and pseudoephedrine, substances used in the illicit manufacture of methamphetamine, continued. However, in contrast to the overall decline in seizures of ephedrines, seizures of pseudoephedrine in the form of pharmaceutical preparations more than doubled in 2021 compared with 2020, and more than trebled compared with 2018, indicating a clear trend of resurgence in the use of such preparations for illicit purposes. Furthermore, the location of reported seizures indicates a likely expansion of the illicit

manufacture of methamphetamine to hitherto unaffected territories. This scenario underscores the need for exporting Governments to be mindful of the estimated annual legitimate requirements of the importing countries for imports of precursors of amphetamine-type stimulants when allowing such exports. The reporting year provided more than one instance of exports in excess of annual legitimate requirements, one of which was later objected to by the importing country, indicating a possible diversion attempt.

Insofar as other precursors of amphetamine-type stimulants are concerned, in the reporting year, the global quantity seized of MAPA, included in Table I of the 1988 Convention in 2020, amounted to only about a third of the quantity reported seized in 2020, confirming the previously observed trend of declining quantities seized of substances after their international scheduling, and their replacement by non-scheduled alternatives. Among the newly reported alternative precursors were DEPAPD for amphetamine and methamphetamine, and 3,4-MDP-2-P ethyl glycidate for MDMA and related substances. In addition, seizures of the previously reported substance MAMDPA continued to be reported.

The global quantity reported seized of the key cocaine precursor, potassium permanganate, nearly doubled in comparison with the quantity reported seized in 2020, with the largest quantities being reported by countries in South America and China. Of the 16 countries reporting such seizures, six were in Europe, indicating the existence in Europe of cocaine laboratories for both the recovery of cocaine base from carrier materials used for smuggling, and the conversion of cocaine base into hydrochloride salt. Seizures of non-scheduled chemicals associated with cocaine manufacture included chemicals used to illicitly manufacture controlled cocaine precursors, as well as chemicals associated with efficiency gains.

As regards heroin precursors, global seizures of acetic anhydride continued the declining trend witnessed since 2018, in particular in countries that had previously reported seizures of sizeable amounts of the substance. In 2021, the amount of acetic anhydride seized in Türkiye accounted for more than 60 per cent of the amount of the substance seized globally, thereby corroborating the country's significance as a transit country between Europe and the likely heroin manufacturing sites in Afghanistan. At the same time, trafficking in acetyl chloride, a possible replacement for acetic anhydride that emerged around 2018, continued to be reported in West Asia.

Precursors of other synthetic drugs also continued to be reported seized or diverted from domestic distribution channels. Such incidents indicated the illicit manufacture of fentanyl, LSD, and phencyclidine and related drugs, as well as of ketamine and new psychoactive substances, including substances recently scheduled under the drug treaties.

As already highlighted by the Board in the past, the use of the Internet (the surface web) to facilitate trafficking in precursors continued to be relevant. India reported seizures of controlled substances in 2022, following investigations using the intelligence packages developed as an outcome of the INCB Operation Acronym, conducted in 2021. A drug trafficking network was also identified, indicating the importance of investigating suspicious Internet postings related to precursors.