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INCB calls for increased focus on improving substance use prevention and treatment services for young people

In its 2019 Annual Report, the International Narcotics Control Board (INCB):

- Highlights the connection between the use of alcohol & tobacco and the use of psychoactive substances like cannabis, opiates and cocaine by children and adolescents;
- Focuses on the physical, emotional and social impact that psychoactive drugs have on young people between the ages of 15-24;
- Urges governments to improve services using evidence-based prevention and treatment interventions for young people;
- Expresses concern about the fast-changing global landscape of illegally manufactured designer-precursors tailored to a diverse and online market;
- Addresses injustices related to the availability of controlled medicines from over-prescription in some countries to limited access in other countries;
- Reminds governments to respect human rights in the implementation of drug policies and in compliance with the three international drug control conventions.

Nature and extent of substance use among young people

The 2019 INCB Annual Report raises concern about psychoactive substance use among young people citing findings of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) World Drug Report 2018. Substance use and associated health consequences are highest among young people, with cannabis being the most widely used substance. UNODC estimates that in 2016, cannabis use affected 5.6 per cent or 13.8 million young people aged 15-16 with rates varying by region. The highest rates were in Europe (13.9 per cent) followed by the Americas (11.6 per cent), Oceania (11.4 per cent), Africa (6.6 per cent), and then Asia (2.7 per cent). Furthermore, the World Health Organization (WHO) Global Health Estimates 2015 show that while deaths from all causes account for only 4.8 per cent in the age group 15-29, they account for 23.1 per cent of deaths attributed to drug use disorders.

The INCB President says: “Of internationally controlled substances, cannabis continues to play the most prominent role among both adolescents and adults. We pay special attention to this development [...] and highlight our concern over the situation in a few countries that have moved to permit the use of controlled substances, namely cannabis, for non-medical use contrary to the provisions of and their obligations under the drug control treaties.”

Relationship of alcohol and tobacco with the use of psychoactive substances

The INCB Annual Report highlights that the use of alcohol and tobacco by children and adolescents is closely linked to starting to use psychoactive substances. Often, the use of alcohol and tobacco

precedes the use of cannabis and other controlled substances. Longitudinal studies that followed children into adulthood have revealed that the earlier the onset of alcohol, tobacco and cannabis use during the ages of 16-19 years, the greater the likelihood of the use of opiates and cocaine in adulthood.

A new framework for the causes of substance use

Research has shown that young people are particularly vulnerable to habitual use of drugs, leading to the risk and protective factors being reviewed. The need for prevention and treatment for children and adolescents should take into account the individual and environmental influences on young people and their development.

Evidence-based prevention interventions that work

According to the UNODC–WHO International Standards on Drug Use Prevention, evidence-based prevention programmes for children and adolescents should include the following elements:

- A focus on family and parenting skills; encourage positive involvement in children's lives; effective communication including setting rules and limits.
- School curricula to develop personal and social skills for youth, including decision-making, goal-setting and analytic skills so young people are informed correctly on the effects of psychoactive substances and can resist pro-drug influences.
- Use of schools for screening and assessment with referrals for counselling and follow-up.
- Strict enforcement of regulations to limit access to medications with psychoactive qualities and reduce accessibility to tobacco, alcohol and cannabis for children and adolescents.

The Standards also identify ineffective prevention approaches that influence youth to initiate substance use and presents specific recommendations for the treatment of adolescents who are substance users.

Recommendations to governments

The INCB Annual report calls on governments to establish national epidemiological data systems to monitor changing trends in psychoactive substance use among young people. This will enable evidence-based prevention to be implemented prior to the age of initiation of use (pre-natal, early/middle childhood, and early adolescence).

Governments should invest in the development of professional expertise in the field of substance use prevention and treatment with a focus on the needs of young people. This should include national training and credentialing systems for prevention and treatment professionals involved in decision making, planning and programme implementation.

Pace of emergence of non-scheduled substitute chemicals tests international precursor controls

The use of non-scheduled chemicals as substitutes for scheduled drug precursors is steadily increasing around the world and with a virtually unlimited variety of chemicals being used. Substance-by-substance scheduling continues to lag behind the speed of innovation of drug traffickers, while many substances have no known legitimate uses and cannot easily be monitored. The INCB urges Governments to continue the wider policy discussion initiated in 2019 on options to respond to these challenges and put in place a global framework to address non-scheduled substances more effectively.

INCB recommends designer precursor for international scheduling

The INCB recommends the international control of methyl *alpha*-phenylacetoacetate (MAPA), a pre-precursor of amphetamine and methamphetamine. MAPA has no known legitimate uses beyond limited research and analytical purposes and can be classified as a designer precursor, made specifically to circumvent existing precursor controls. In March 2020, upon the

recommendation of the INCB, the Commission on Narcotic Drugs will vote on placing the chemical under international control, through inclusion in Table I of the 1988 Convention

Continued support to Afghanistan

In 2018, there was a substantial reduction in the total area under illegal opium poppy cultivation and the estimated amount of opium produced in Afghanistan due to severe drought. However, the estimated size of the opiate economy remains substantial, exceeding the value of the country's legal exports of goods and services. The INCB will continue to consult the Government of Afghanistan with a view to facilitate the delivery of assistance in addressing drug control challenges in the country.

In its 2019 report, the INCB reiterates the need to prioritize measures to address the illegal drug economy in Afghanistan, which should be part of the overall effort to build peace, establish security and achieve sustainable development in the country. The INCB is calling on the international community to take part in this process through comprehensive, local, national, regional and international assistance efforts.

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