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Madam Chairperson, Honourable Ministers, Mr. Executive Director of UNODC, your Excellencies, distinguished delegates.

We are assembled to assess successes, failures and difficulties encountered in the implementation of the action plans and the Declaration adopted at the United Nations General Assembly's Special Session (UNGASS) in 1998. This forum therefore offers us the opportunity to exchange views and act collectively in focusing on measures that work best in resolving the world's drug problem.

In 1998, more than 150 Governments set goals and targets in the drug control fields as the expression of the will of the international community to address the drug problem in a balanced, integrated and comprehensive manner. The goals and targets have been met to varying degrees by Governments. Overall, significant reduction in the illicit demand for and supply of drugs continues to be the goal of the international community.

UNGASS addressed mainly aspects of drug control that did not feature prominently in the drug conventions. UNGASS was silent on drug law enforcement that had been adequately provided for in the drug conventions. And UNGASS did not discuss aspects of international drug control that had been shown to function very well. Licit control of more than 200 drugs and substances under international control and used for medical purposes was not discussed because it works. These drugs represent a large market, one that is probably far larger than the illicit drug market.

In our globalized world, drug policies adopted in one country have consequences on others. As the Board pointed out in its 2002 report, unilateral action, conceived in a purely national context, can compromise the integrity of the entire international drug control system.

There is consensus that cannabis is a harmful drug. The Board is, therefore, concerned over debates on its decriminalization and legalization. Such debates divert attention from reality, foster dissemination of misleading messages, ignore concerns for public health, undermine effective global drug control efforts and may promote increased illicit supply and demand for drugs.

The drug problem affects all countries in varying degrees but depends on international cooperation and collaboration for long-term solution. No country working alone, can solve the drug problem. Multilateral cooperation has been shown to yield better dividends. It is in this context that the existing international drug control treaties must remain the overall framework and consensus around which national drug policies are developed.

The 2002 annual report of the Board found that long-term economic development is hampered by ineffective drug control and that sustainable economic development is a precondition for achieving good drug control. It is therefore imperative that development assistance should take into account these interdependencies.

Significant reduction in the demand for drugs has always been possible when governments demonstrate a strong will and commitment in addressing the drug problem. History has shown that the enforcement of international and national drug laws succeeds in preventing the illicit supply and use of drugs as shown by:

- the significant reduction in the supply of opium to China after the adoption of the 1912 and other drug Conventions during the League of Nations;
- the reduction of amphetamine abuse in Japan at varying times in the 20th century;
- the prevention of illicit manufacture of amphetamine-type-stimulants on the territories of Japan and the Republic of Korea;
- the significant decline in opium poppy cultivation in South-East Asia in recent years;
- the significant decline in illicit cultivation of coca bush in Peru and Bolivia from 1999 to 2001;
- the decline in the abuse of some drugs in a number of countries in recent years.
- the reduction in coca bush cultivation in Colombia through implementation of Plan Colombia.

Significant progress has been made by some Governments in actions against money-laundering, actions to improve judicial cooperation and in precursor control. The Board is pleased with successful interdiction of precursor chemicals used for the illicit manufacture of cocaine, heroin and amphetamine-type-stimulants through its Operations Purple and Topaz and Project Prism.

The international community should continue to build on these successes and demonstrate a collective will and determination to rid our societies of illicit drug supply and use.

Governments should not be discouraged when drug abuse levels increase or stagnate temporarily. Instead, governments should develop objective and reliable mechanisms for effective assessment of the impact of drug policies and implement sustainable drug supply and demand reduction programmes with short and longer term outcomes.

The drug dependent persons are asking to be salvaged from their drug dependency. It is our collective responsibility to protect these vulnerable groups in our inner cities, in our school systems and in our towns and villages from the scourge of illicit drug use. We cannot and should not fail to act. We must continue with our efforts to free our societies from illicit drug use. We must become more adept in implementing programmes that prevent illicit drug use.

Madam Chairperson, let me assure you of the Board's resolve to continue to serve the international community with objectivity, dedication, devotion, courage and in an independent manner so as to meet the challenges imposed on us by the drug conventions and various resolutions of the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and the General Assembly. We cannot afford to do less.