

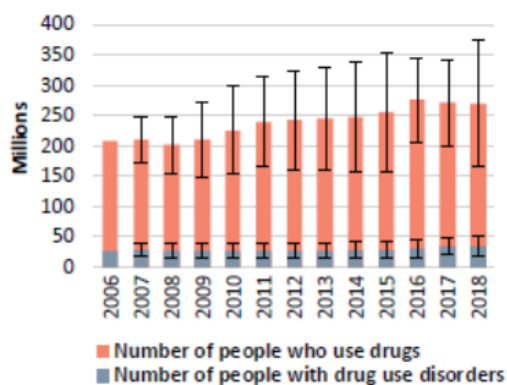
International cooperation to address and counter the world drug problem

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Introduction

It is not a secret that drugs ruin families, lives and even kill. Drug-addiction is associated with an agonizing struggle for the person using drugs as well as with the consequences that hurt families, potentially across generations, as well as friends and entire communities. Using drugs puts the health and mental health of the user at risk, which is especially high in early adolescence. Illegal drug markets are linked with violence and other forms of crime. Drugs can fuel and prolong local and international conflicts, causing the destabilizing effects that hinder sustainable development.¹

Number of people who use drugs and people with drug use disorders, 2006–2018



Source: UNODC, responses to the annual report questionnaire.

In general, the international community shares the common goals of protecting the health and welfare of the people. There is a strong—but universal—consensus that drug use for non-medical purposes is harmful.

However, nowadays there is a continuous debate about the reasonability of total prohibition. There is a growing global trend of legalization and decriminalization of certain types of drugs. Three factors are important. First, there is a popular demand in some countries for liberalization. Second, there is growing interest in legalization, which might allow greater control the drug markets and decrease associated crimes. Finally, the legal drug market brings tax revenues for the governments. Legalization could deprive organized crime and enrich UN Member States.

In the dynamically globalizing world, addressing and countering the world drug problem more than ever requires common vision, understanding and multilateral solutions. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, a UN research institute, has shown that perceptions of cannabis harms have decreased in areas where the drug has been legalized.² At the same time, these areas demonstrate the increase in the proportion of people with psychiatric disorders and suicides associated with regular cannabis use, together with the number of hospitalizations.

¹ United Nations, 2022. ‘World Drug Report’, UNODC, 2022,

https://www.unodc.org/res/wdr2022/MS/WDR22_Booklet_1.pdf

² Ibid.



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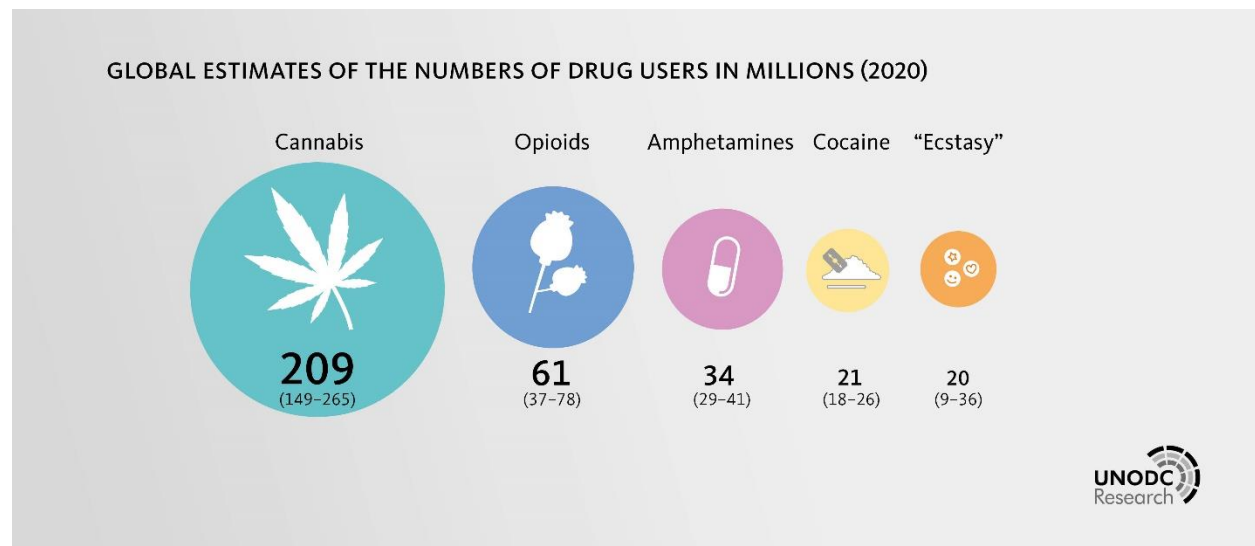
Nevertheless, the social, economic and health risks associated with drug use for non-medical purposes are not affecting only the consumers. Drugs production and smuggling significantly impacts the impoverished communities. Increasing environmental problems, stipulating corruption, and undermining the rule of law and stability. All things considered, the drug problem is global and requires a coordinated response. The United Nations provides the platform for international cooperation to address the drug problem.

Historical background

While the history of drug production and use is millennia-long, international drug control is a relatively recent phenomenon. Opium production and trade for centuries was a significant revenue source for Great Powers and smaller nations. Until the beginning of the 20th

century, the international community showed little interest in suppressing a business that was so profitable for opium merchants, shippers, bankers, insurance agencies and governments.

The international community acknowledged international drug-trafficking as a problem only in the beginning of the 20th century. However, the aim was not the global prohibition of drugs. The multilateral drug control was aimed at managing the spillovers associated with the production, manufacture, trade, and consumption of certain drugs. Globalization made it much easier to produce and trade drugs internationally, therefore the nations tried to regulate the drug market as any other international market.



One of the key goals was to prevent predatory state behavior and enable adherence to national regulations. In the environment where drugs can be produced in one country and smuggled to another, national drug control regulations

become irrelevant. While there was a certain level of consensus in relation to general international drug control strategy, the approach to the details was not always similar. For the United States, with the experience in the



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Philippines, the main approach was complete prohibition. Many European nations preferred regulated drug markets.³

The first attempt to control production and international opium trade was the International Opium Commission that met from 1 to 26 February 1909, in Shanghai. The international ramifications of the Chinese opium problem were the main reason for the United States, Austria-Hungary, China, France, Germany, United Kingdom, Italy, Japan, Netherlands, Persia, Portugal, Russia, and Siam to come together and seek for an international solution. Although the Commission was not intended to establish binding obligations, it nevertheless enhanced the establishment of narcotics control as an institution of international law on a multilateral basis.

Three years later, China, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the Netherlands, Persia (Iran), Portugal, Russia, Siam (Thailand), the UK and the British Overseas Territories (including British India) signed *The Hague Opium Convention* of 1912, the first international drug-control agreement. The 1919 peace treaty of Versailles, which ended World War One, contained a clause which required all its signatories to adhere to the provisions of the convention. By 1949, 67 nations had legally signed and ratified the Hague Treaty, developing a multilateral system intended to control production, trafficking, and abuse of drugs.

The United Nations adopted three conventions in 1961, 1971 and 1988 aimed to reduce the vulnerability of societies to drugs and crime, adherence to which is now almost universal.⁴ In

³ Collins, John, 2021. *Legalising the Drug Wars: A Regulatory History of UN Drug Control.* Cambridge University Press, 2021.

⁴ United Nations, 2008. '100 Years of Drug Control', UNODC, 2008. [://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/Studies/100_Years_of_Drug_Control.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/Studies/100_Years_of_Drug_Control.pdf)

1991, the *United Nations International Drug Control Programme* was established for coordinating and providing effective leadership for all UN drug control activities. In 1997, the United Nations established the Office for Drug Control and Crime Prevention, an agency that focuses on drug-trafficking, and associated crime prevention and criminal justice, international terrorism, and political corruption.

Current situation

The COVID-19 pandemic trends show an increase in drug production and consumption. Colombia, the world's largest cocaine producer, reported a 43 percent increase in areas planted with coca, hitting the historic level in 2021. Along with drug cultivation, drug exports from Colombia to the US and Europe have also grown from 1,010 tons of cocaine to 1,400 tons. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) explains the increase in coca cultivation and cocaine production by the "territorial vulnerability," the increase in global demand and the influence of armed groups who profit from the drug-trafficking.⁵ Beside growing cocaine trafficking, seizures of amphetamine and methamphetamine have skyrocketed the post-pandemic environment. UNODC reports that the markets for these drugs are expanding to new and more vulnerable regions.⁶

The recent decades can be described by changes in public attitudes and policy towards cannabis use. Many nations today shift their policy from prohibition to complete or partial legalization and decriminalization. The process takes an

⁵ Fadul, Laura, 2022. 'Colombia breaks record for coca cultivation: UN report', AA, 10.20.2022, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/americas/colombia-breaks-record-for-coca-cultivation-un-report/2716957>

⁶ United Nations, 2022. 'World Drug Report', UNODC, 2022, https://www.unodc.org/res/wdr2022/MS/WDR22_Booklet_1.pdf



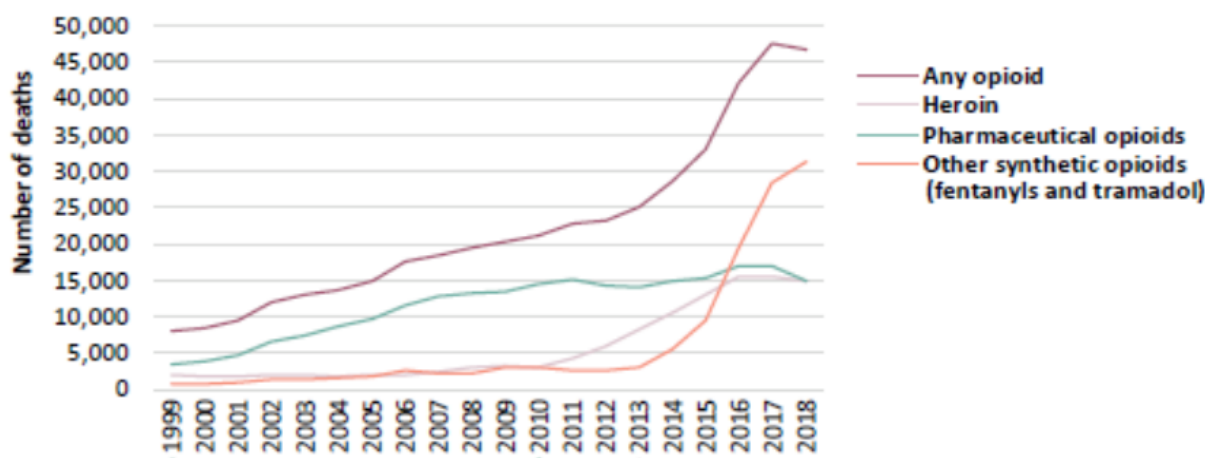
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extraordinary pace in the Americas and seems likely to continue in other countries. Even though scientific evidence for many proposed

medicinal uses of cannabinoids remains to be weak, the public demand is growing together with an increase of cultural acceptance.

FIG. 27 Opioid overdose deaths in the United States, 1999–2018



In concert with growing legalization trends, drug dependence and deaths due to opioid overdose continue to rise globally. Nations such as Canada, the UK, and the USA remain suffering from the opioid crisis. Drug-related problems spillover to new regions and take new forms. Iraq and Afghanistan, notorious for production of opioids, become new global sources for methamphetamine production.

The international community also has seen the alarming proliferation of new psychoactive substances (NPS). These are kinds of drugs that have been designed to mimic established illicit drugs, such as cannabis, cocaine, MDMA and LSD.⁷ This trend has resulted in greater access

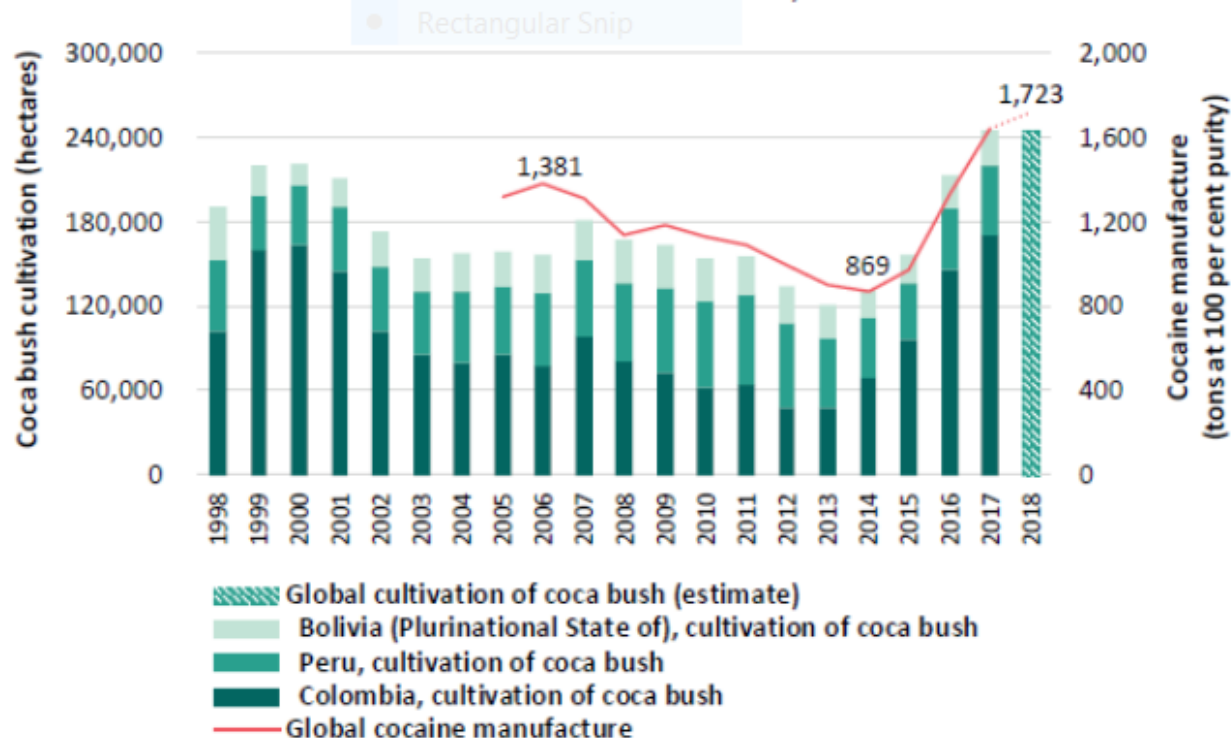
to more potent and cheaper substances that are potentially more harmful to the health of users than some of those derived from plants. The regulation of NPS becomes a new major challenge for health and criminal policy in many nations, especially in low-income and middle-income countries with insufficient resources to identify and respond to NPS.

Worsening the problem is the constant creation of ever more illegal drug. In 2020 United Nations Office of Drug Control (UNODC) documented the emergence of 950 new psychoactive substances around 120 countries and territories.⁸

⁷ ADF, 2021. 'New psychoactive substances', ADF, 11.20.2021, <https://adf.org.au/drug-facts/new-psychoactive-substances/>

⁸ Das, Pamela, 2019. 'The global drug problem: change but not progression', 10.23.2019, [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(19\)32275-5/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(19)32275-5/fulltext)

9 Global coca bush cultivation and cocaine manufacture, 1998–2018



Role of the United Nations

The UN provides knowledge on the global drug problem, and works to build international consensus for action.

Based in Vienna, with offices in New York and Brussels, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), remains to be a global leader in the fight against illicit drugs and international crime. UNODC leads international efforts in educating people throughout the world about the dangers of drug abuse. Strengthening international action against illicit drug production and trafficking and drug-related crime, UNODC actively works in the areas of illicit drug crop cultivation. In the affected areas,

UNODC implements projects against drug-related crimes, money laundering and corruption. UNODC consults regional and national administrations on criminal justice reforms to strengthen the rule of law. Working with governments and non-governmental organizations, UNODC provides programs tailored to countries' particular needs.⁹

Drug trafficking has a significant impact not only on public health but also on international peace and security. In 2009, The UN Security Council unanimously adopted a presidential statement that called for greater action to fight against drug trafficking as a threat to international security. Encouraging regional cooperation to counter this transnational threat, the Security Council considers drug trafficking

⁹ United Nations, n.d., 'UNODC', UNOV, n.d., <https://www.unov.org/unov/en/unodc.html#:~:text=The%20United%20Nations%20Office%20on%20Drug>

s%20and%20Crime%20(UNODC)%20is,approximately%20500%20staff%20members%20worldwide.



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an important factor in conflict prevention strategies and analysis. In many areas, where the United Nations is involved in building peace, such as Afghanistan, Guinea-Bissau, Haiti, Liberia and Sierra Leone, drug production and trafficking become among the greatest obstacles in the process. The alternative routes of drug-trafficking across Chad, Niger, and Mali enforce terrorists and anti-Government groups in the Sahel giving resources to fund their operations, purchase equipment and pay foot-soldiers.¹⁰

The UN General Assembly continues to monitor the progress in the execution of the Political Declaration and Plan of Action on International Cooperation towards an Integrated and Balanced Strategy to Counter the World Drug Problem. It gives assessment of the achievements and challenges in countering the world drug problem, within the framework of the three international drug control conventions and other relevant United Nations instruments. Even though the General Assembly actively promotes a society free of drug abuse, it advocates for international cooperation to ensure drug availability and accessibility for medical and scientific purposes.

Promoting global healthy society and supporting the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals, the UN General Assembly does it with full respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of States, the principle of non-intervention in the internal affairs of States.¹¹ This position leaves the nations quite large space of interpretation of the UN drug-related policy. The General Assembly can assess the progress, give recommendations, and make international statements related to drug policy. However, it can hardly intervene in national policy making.

¹⁰ United Nations, 2009. 'Security Council debates "devastating impact" of drug trafficking', UNODC, 12.09.2009, <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/frontpage/2009/December/security-council-debates-devastating-impact-of-drug-trafficking.html>

Landmark UN resolutions

There are three major drug control treaties currently in force: *The Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs* (1961); *The Convention on Psychotropic Substances* (1971); and *The United Nations Convention Against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances* (1988).

The Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs, 1961, was aimed at combating drug abuse by multilateral international cooperation. The convention proposed two major forms of intervention and control. First, it advocated the limitation of the possession, use, trade in, distribution, import, export, manufacture and production of drugs exclusively for medical and scientific purposes. Second, it proposed to deter and discourage drug traffickers by international coordinated efforts.

It is the oldest international treaty that aims to control cultivation, production, supply, trade, transport of specific narcotic drugs and lays down a system of licenses, measures for treatment, research, and other regulations for their medical and scientific uses. With the convention, the United Nations also established the International Narcotics Control Board, an organization that monitors the production and trade of narcotics and psychotropics, as well as their availability for medical and scientific purposes.

The Convention on Psychotropic Substances of 1971 increased the scope of psychoactive drugs controlled and monitored by the United Nations, including amphetamine-type stimulants,

¹¹ United Nations, 2016. 'Outcome Document of The 2016 United Nations General Assembly Special Session on the World Drug Problem', UNODC, 2016, <https://www.unodc.org/documents/postungass2016/outcome/V1603301-E.pdf>



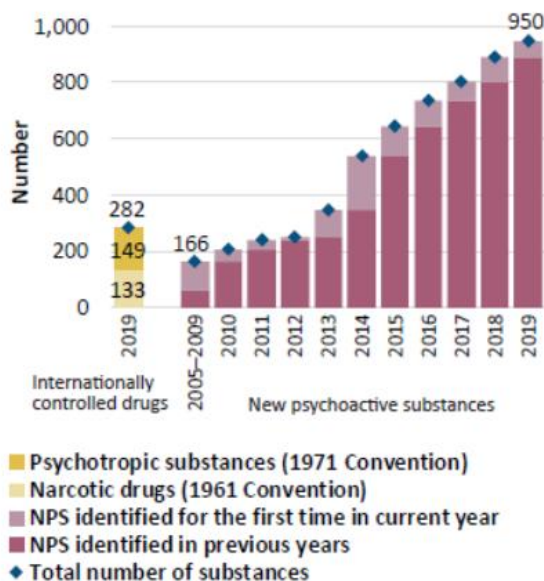
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barbiturates, benzodiazepines, and psychedelics in addition to cannabis, coca and opium-like drugs outlined by the Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs of 1961. According to the convention, the nations agreed to limit the use of listed substances to medical and scientific purposes. The Convention regulates prescriptions, warnings on packages and advertising, records, international trade, and export and import restrictions. In frames of the Convention the nations agreed on the system of reports and prosecution of illicit traffic of psychotropic substances.¹²

Substances of 1988 provides additional legal mechanisms for enforcing the 1961 Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs and the 1971 Convention on Psychotropic Substances. This Convention provides comprehensive measures against drug trafficking, including provisions against money laundering and the diversion of precursor chemicals through international cooperation in extradition of drug traffickers, controlled deliveries, and transfer of proceedings.¹³

FIG. 61 Number of internationally controlled drugs in 2019 and new psychoactive substances identified at the global level, 2005–2019 (cumulative figures)



The United Nations Convention Against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic

The most recent resolution (A/RES/76/188)¹⁴ on international cooperation to counter the world drug problem was adopted by the General Assembly on 16 December 2021. In the resolution the Member States of the United Nations welcome the efforts to comply with the treaty provisions effectively implement the previously adopted conventions and instruments. The resolution urges all Member States that have not yet done so to ratify or accede to those instruments. Among the new topics, the United Nations underlined the importance of addressing new type of drug-trafficking, such as online sales through both the darknet and the surface web. The nations are also deeply concerned with the proliferation of new psychoactive substances worldwide

In addition to the social threat, the members of the United Nations find that illicit drug production and trafficking is a serious threat to environment. It causes deforestation, erosion and degradation, loss of endemic species, contamination of soil, groundwater and waterways, and the release of greenhouse gases. Therefore, the world drug problem must be

¹² U.S. Department of Justice, 1977. 'Convention on Psychotropic Substances', Office of Justice Programs, 1997, <https://www.ojp.gov/ncjrs/virtual-library/abstracts/convention-psychotropic-substances-1971>

¹³ United Nations, n.d. 'United Nations Convention against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and

Psychotropic Substances, 1988', UNODC, n.d. <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/treaties/illicit-traffic.html>

¹⁴ United Nations. General Assembly Resolution A/RES/76/188 (2021) (New York: United Nations, 16 December 2021), documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N21/405/88/PDF/N2140588.pdf



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addressed in consideration with *The Sustainable Development Goals*, the Agenda 2030.

cannabis for personal use as an offense, for example, the penalty can vary from none to imprisonment.

Country and bloc positions

China: China has strict drug control laws and a police-controlled approach to drug addiction treatment. In China drug users shall be registered with police, and registered users shall be monitored by the police-administered real-time electronic online tracking system. Police, not courts, are the only decision-making authority in the field of drug-control. Drug addiction treatment institutions must report patients' information to police.¹⁵

China denounced the legalization and decriminalization in other nations. In 2019, Beijing's leading drug enforcement body claimed that the legalization of marijuana in Canada and parts of the United States is a national threat to China, blaming it for a spike in the number of drugs smuggled into the country. According to the Chinese administration, the smugglers actively use international postal services. According to Beijing, they intercepted a total of 1940 ounces of cannabis and cannabis products sent through international postal parcels in 2018. Without revealing the exact numbers, they stated increasing cannabis traffic from North America to China.¹⁶

European Union: The EU treats the cultivation, supply and possession of cannabis according to international law, which restricts it to medical and scientific purposes.¹⁷ However, some EU Member States have unique exceptions. While all EU Member States treat possession of



In the Netherlands, most famously, sale and personal possession technically remains punishable by imprisonment. But in practice, coffeeshops selling cannabis are tolerated, provided they adhere to strict criteria and are licensed by the municipality. In some European countries, cultivation of a small amount of cannabis is tolerated for one person's use. In Spain, groups of users tried to use this opportunity to create "cannabis social clubs", which could grow, for instance, 20 plants for 20 users. However, this initiative was banned by the Spanish Supreme Court in 2015. Even though

¹⁵ Meng, Jinmei, 2013. 'Chinese drug laws: Police-controlled approach to drug abuse', NIH, 2013, <https://nida.nih.gov/international/abstracts/chinese-drug-laws-police-controlled-approach-to-drug-abuse>

¹⁶ Xiong, Yong, 2019, 'World Audio Live TV Log In Beijing says US legalization of marijuana is a 'threat to China'', CNN, 06.17.2019,

<https://www.cnn.com/2019/06/17/asia/china-us-marijuana-smuggling-intl-hnk>

¹⁷ European Union, n.d. 'Cannabis policy: status and recent developments', EMCDDA, n.d. https://www.emcdda.europa.eu/publications/topic-overviews/cannabis-policy/html_en



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there is a certain increase in popular acceptance of cannabis in Europe, no EU member-state supports legalization of cannabis sale for recreational use, and all countries have prison sentences for illegal supply.¹⁸

Non-Aligned Movement (NAM): Illegal drugs are a serious problem of many of the 120 Member States of the Non-Aligned Movement, the UN's largest voting bloc. NAM members suffer when their people become users, a personal tragedy and a national burden. They also suffer when their people are involved in illegal drug production, such as growing opium poppy or cocaine. The crops are lucrative for farmer, but invite organized crime, leading to extortion and murder, undermining the power and legality of the state, perverting authority and politics, undermining the credibility of entire governments.

Most NAM Member States harshly criminalize drug crime, especially trafficking. Death sentences for traffickers are not uncommon, sometimes even for users. With their governments overwhelmed, the biggest question for many NAM governments is how to address the problem. Dependent farmers must be compensated, or they return to drug production. Trafficking must be suppressed, but this leads to even more corruption. Some are considering legalization, hoping it will provide an alternative.

Most are agreed the focus of responsibility is not just with drug producers, but also with consumers. So long as countries in Europe, North America and elsewhere are willing to pay extraordinary amounts for illegal drugs, it will

be impossible for weaker emerging countries to deal with the problem. UN leadership will be essential as they try to address the problem.

Russia has a very strict drug policy. Even though compulsory drug treatment was proclaimed unconstitutional at the end of the Cold War, in recent decades, several federal laws and regulations were amended to establish compulsory drug treatment. Drug users are one of the most stigmatized and marginalized populations in Russia. However, in Russia's political discourse, illicit drugs are mainly considered as a foreign threat, rather than a national problem. In the Russian Duma, illicit drugs are seen as posing a threat to the Russian population, mainly as a result of Afghan opium production. In this sense, the rhetoric focusing on supply rather than demand is similar to the one in the US.¹⁹

United States: The United States used to accuse China of being behind the US opioid crisis. In August 2018, US President Donald J. Trump claimed that fentanyl was "pouring into the US postal system" from suppliers in China.²⁰ The claim is quite like the one that China makes about cannabis from North America.

In the recent decades following the trend in Canada, the United States significantly shifted the drug policy from complete prohibition to decriminalization and legalization of cannabis. By June 2022 nineteen states, two territories, and the District of Columbia have legalized small amounts of cannabis for adult recreational use.²¹ However, the United States is against decriminalization of cocaine in Colombia, where they conducted decades-long "war on drugs".

¹⁸ European Union, n.d. 'Cannabis policy: status and recent developments', EMCDDA, n.d.

https://www.emcdda.europa.eu/publications/topic-overviews/cannabis-policy/html_en

¹⁹ McVay, Doug, 2022. 'Russia', Drug Policy Facts, 08.09.2022,

<https://www.drugpolicyfacts.org/region/russia>

²⁰ <https://www.cnn.com/2019/06/17/asia/china-us-marijuana-smuggling-intl-hnk>

²¹ Hartman, Michael, 2022. 'Cannabis Overview', NCSL, 05.31.2022,

<https://www.ncsl.org/research/civil-and-criminal-justice/marijuana-overview.aspx>



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Colombia, being the source of more than 90 percent of the drugs seized in the United States, in 2022 announced an intention to decriminalize cocaine and marijuana to wrest the market from armed groups and cartels. With respect to Colombian sovereignty, the United States showed a certain level of skepticisms about this intention.²²

Celebrated cases often drive drug policy. A week before Russia invaded Ukraine, one of the most successful players in women's professional basketball in the US, Brittney Griner, was arrested at Sheremetyevo airport near Moscow when cannabis oil vape cartridges were allegedly found in her luggage. Russia does not enforce drug policy consistently, sometimes using its harsh laws selectively, to make political points. Griner pleaded guilty to drug charges but has denied deliberately breaking the law. She was sentenced to nine years in prison on drug charges. Her case has become subject to high-profile diplomacy between the US and Russia, which now discuss a potential prisoner swap that could involve the basketball player, possibly traded for a notorious Russian arms dealer—Victor Bout—imprisoned by the US.²³

Proposals for action

How to overcome the weakness of existing international approaches to the problem and change trends in illegal drug use? There are innumerable possibilities open to the General Assembly. A few possibilities to be considered include:

- **Create regional networks** to improve information, monitor suspicious activity, exchange evidence, facilitate legal cooperation and strengthen regional efforts against organized crime.²⁴ These might include the Caribbean, Latin America, Southeast Asia and trans-Saharan regions. A similar proposal was presented by then-Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon in 2009, but has never been fully implemented. The network could extend functions such as those already developed under the example of the trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership program.
- **State clear global policy on drug use.** The General Assembly can state its moral position possibly encouraging the expansion of gender-sensitive services for drug treatment and HIV prevention, treatment, and care to ensure that women feel safe and not stigmatized, exercise their childcare responsibilities, and are supported regarding other needs. But achieving a global consensus may be difficult, reflecting sharp divisions between Member States that support the rights and needs of drug producers and users, and those demanding universal respect for rule of law and basic moral principles of prohibition.
- **Initiate global research** on the economic and social effects of legalization, decriminalization and depenalization and monitor the consequences in the nations which adopted these policies. Research is a

²² Schmidt, Samantha, 2022, 'Colombia, largest cocaine supplier to U.S., considers decriminalizing', The Washington Post, 08.20.2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/08/20/colombia-cocaine-decriminalize-petro/>

²³ BBC, 2022. 'Brittney Griner: US basketball star jailed for nine years on drug charges', BBC,

08.04.2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-62427635>

²⁴ United Nations, 2009. 'Security Council debates "devastating impact" of drug trafficking', UNODC, 12.09.2009, <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/frontpage/2009/December/security-council-debates-devastating-impact-of-drug-trafficking.html>



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popular option in the UN, since it is something even sharply divided Member States can agree on. Not all will be satisfied, since research can be an alternative to action, a way of delaying action. Research may contribute to better policy. It also can slow policy-making.

- The alternative for the knowledge-based decision-making the international community can take to **extreme approaches, either the global prohibition or global legalization**. Each of the approaches have own advantages and disadvantages. Each will have their supporters, and each will have adversaries.

- **Call for de-stigmatization** of drug users and implementation of humane approaches to treatment of drug abuse. Urge UN Member States to adopt measures providing voluntary treatment for drug abusers. Legalization of drug use or even drug trafficking and production are possibilities. This will be popular with some states, not with all.
- **Urge the nations to avoid unilateral decision-making**. Any drug-related policy must be adopted considering transnational effects. Call for the negotiations between producer and user states, such as Colombia and the United States, Morocco and Netherlands, Afghanistan and Russia, regarding the potential changes in regional drug-related policy.



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