



The international drug control system

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Reverend Monsignor,

Your Majesty,

Distinguished participants,

My sincere thanks to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences for holding this very important workshop to strengthen science-based solutions to a problem of great concern to all of the international community.

I would also like to take this opportunity to thank your Majesty, for your dedicated efforts to prevent drug abuse around the world, and for your long-standing support for the work of the UN Office on Drugs and Crime, including our launch of the Listen First prevention campaign in New York during the recent UN General Assembly Special Session on drugs (UNGASS).

Today, I would like to focus on the outcomes of the UNGASS and their impact on the international drug control system.

But before I do so, I would like to tell you how impressed I was listening to the first address of His Holiness Pope Francis to the UN General Assembly in September 2015.

He spoke, in particular, about "another kind of conflict which is not always so open, yet is silently killing millions of people. Another kind of war experienced by many of our societies as a result of the narcotics trade."

He said, and I quote, "Drug trafficking is by its very nature accompanied by trafficking in persons, money laundering, the arms trade, child exploitation and other forms of corruption. A corruption which has penetrated to different levels of social, political, military, artistic and religious life, and, in many cases, has given rise to a parallel structure which threatens the credibility of our institutions".

This important address highlighted the seriousness of drug challenges.

It made clear the links with other forms of crime and corruption, as the criminal networks behind drug trafficking are often involved in other cruel offences.

The words of His Holiness illuminated the wide-ranging negative impact that illicit drugs have on peace, security, development, health and human rights all over the world.

This is evident if we look at just a few of the problems we are facing, including:

- the intensifying nexus of organized crime groups and terrorists profiting from the illicit drug trade;
- the use of the darknet for drug trafficking;
- the proliferation of new psychoactive substances;
- a growing market for amphetamines, including captagon, in the Middle East;
- the destabilizing effects of drugs and trafficking on fragile regions such as West Africa;
- lethal violence in Central America; and
- the opioid crisis in North America.

Globally, there are more than two hundred thousand drug-related deaths a year, with up to half of these deaths involving opioids.

Twenty-nine million people were identified as problem drug users, including twelve million people who inject drugs, fourteen per cent of whom live with HIV.

Contained in those dry facts and figures is a world of pain and suffering.

Drugs and crime so often harm those who can least afford it, gaining a foothold where poverty, instability and weak rule of law have left people, especially young people, vulnerable.

And it is not only those afflicted by drug use disorders who suffer, but their families and the people around them, as drugs and crime undermine communities and tear away at the very social fabric that binds us together.

Promoting a unified response to these challenges has become a major priority for the international community in recent years.

As you know, the current drug control framework is based on three international treaties – the Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs of 1961, the Convention on Psychotropic Substances of 1971 and the Convention against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances of 1988 — for which the UN acts as custodian.

These treaties are mutually supportive and complementary, and they share the founding purpose of protecting and promoting the health and welfare of humankind.

Furthermore, in 2009 Member States adopted the "Political Declaration and Plan of Action on International Cooperation towards an Integrated and Balanced Strategy to Counter the World Drug Problem", which defined actions to be taken, as well as the goals to be achieved, by 2019.

UNODC is mandated to assist countries to fulfil their obligations under the conventions, as well as to implement the UN Conventions on transnational organized crime and corruption, the international counter terrorism instruments and the UN standards and norms on crime prevention and criminal justice.

This work, of course, includes criminal justice responses to drugs and crime, and building international cooperation, as well as regional and inter-regional law enforcement networks, to go after drug traffickers. They must be brought to justice.

But it just as importantly includes improving access to controlled medicines for pain relief, and promoting sustainable livelihoods for communities to free themselves from illicit drug cultivation.

It also includes advancing evidence-based prevention and treatment of drug use disorders and related problems of HIV and hepatitis.

That means treating people suffering from drug use disorders not as criminals but as victims, as people in need of health and social services.

This balanced and inclusive approach is rooted in the drug control conventions, which allow, in appropriate cases of a minor nature, alternatives to conviction or punishment for those found in possession of illicit substances for personal consumption, using such measures as education, rehabilitation and social reintegration.

The use of alternatives to custodial measures can also be extremely important for efforts to address violent extremism, as it can prevent the recruitment of vulnerable inmates by terrorists.

I would also note that the conventions do not support the application of the death penalty to drug – related offences, and UNODC strongly advocates for responses and sentencing that adhere to principles of proportionality.

Despite progress in some of these areas, the international community continues to face a number of evolving and emerging threats posed by drugs, both in terms of criminal supply and the health consequences of demand.

The UNGASS was therefore an important opportunity to assess progress and setbacks, also in implementing the 2009 Plan of Action, and to agree a way forward.

It was only the third session in the GA's history to focus on this topic so it was a major high-level meeting.

The preparations for the 2016 session, which were led by the Vienna-based Commission on Narcotic Drugs, were wide-ranging, inclusive and intensive, and took place over the course of two years.

These efforts culminated in the April session with the adoption of an outcome document entitled, "Our joint commitment to effectively addressing and countering the world drug problem".

This result is a credit to Member States, who in the face of many differences were able to reach consensus on addressing complex, sensitive challenges posed by drugs.

The outcome document reaffirmed the framework of the three international drug control conventions, and recognized that the conventions allow for flexibility in their implementation.

It outlined a number of operational recommendations addressing demand and supply reduction; access to controlled medicines; issues of human rights, youth, children, women and communities; emerging challenges, including new psychoactive substances; strengthening international cooperation; and alternative development.

In this way it has helped to define and take forward balanced, comprehensive, rights and evidence-based approaches to the world drug problem, with an emphasis on prevention and treatment.

Moreover, by recognizing that efforts to address the world drug problem and achieve sustainable development are complementary and mutually reinforcing, the outcome document ties in with the new 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which will guide the work of the international community for the next fifteen years.

The 2030 Agenda has also made clear with Sustainable Development Goals three and sixteen that addressing drugs is necessary to ensure healthy lives, and to promote peaceful and inclusive societies, as part of overall efforts towards sustainable development.

This year's UNODC World Drug Report focuses on the links between drugs and development, as well as with violence and corruption, and the social, economic and environmental costs of drugs.

My colleague and head of UNODC research Angela Me will be discussing these conclusions in a session this afternoon.

I would just like to mention an example that highlights the urgent need to holistically address drugs and development, namely Afghanistan.

Last month, we launched the Afghanistan Opium Survey 2016, which reported a worrying reversal in counter-narcotics efforts.

The total area under opium poppy cultivation has increased ten per cent over the previous year, while eradication has plummeted some ninety-one per cent.

Average opium yield grew by thirty per cent, leading to a corresponding forty-three per cent rise in production.

It is well known that drug trafficking is helping to fund the Taliban, and exacerbating security challenges in Afghanistan and its neighbours in West and Central Asia, as well as along drug routes to the rest of the world.

What is less discussed is that Afghanistan is also the first of the many victims of this deadly trade, suffering devastating levels of drug addiction, alongside problems of insecurity, violence and corruption that hinder not only law enforcement efforts but economic progress and development.

It is my hope that UNGASS has strengthened the foundation for collective action based on shared responsibility to address such challenges, and help free the many people, especially young people, trapped in downward spirals of poverty, drugs, crime and violence.

The Commission on Narcotic Drugs is already engaged in a dynamic follow up to the UNGASS outcome document, addressing all areas identified, with an inclusive format involving UN entities, international and regional organizations and NGOs.

Governments have commended these thematic discussions for providing a valuable opportunity to hear how the operational recommendations of UNGASS are being translated into action, helping to develop a better understanding of what it takes to implement an integrated, multidisciplinary, evidence-based and comprehensive approach to addressing the world drug problem.

For our part, UNODC remains committed to:

- working in close cooperation with all our partners, including civil society and religious leaders
- through our global, regional and country programmes and network of field offices,
- to support criminal justice and public health responses that strike a balance between:
- caring for those affected by drugs based on the lessons of science, and
- pursuing strong determined action of organized crime in full respect of human rights and international standards.

UNODC has launched an informal Scientific Network and Youth Forum to further strengthen cooperation towards these goals.

In a similar vein, this workshop, by bringing together leading professionals, experts, medical doctors, researchers and practitioners to discuss solutions, can provide much needed insight and input, and can help to ensure that our efforts are effective, targeted, humane and just

I would like to thank the Pontifical Academies of Sciences once again for this initiative, and to also express my deep appreciation for the attention of His Holiness Pope Francis to the issue of drugs, and his messages on World Youth Day and other occasions bringing much needed attention to this problem.

I am very much looking forward to hearing your conclusions.

Thank you.