



Introduction

H.M. Queen Silvia of Sweden

Your Excellences,

Ministers,

Ladies and Gentlemen

It is my great pleasure to be part of this session and I am pleased to see so many countries and organizations represented here today. The presence of so much knowledge, expertise and commitment at this workshop underlines the importance of these issues.

I like to thank Bishop Sánchez Sorondo and the Pontifical Academies of Sciences for the initiative to bring this eminent group together here in the Vatican. This initiative is important for the global community and I hope it will inspire and help people in many countries to prevent drugs from causing even more destruction.

International cooperation is crucial in order to successfully prevent drug abuse. As we all know there is still much work to be done - not least with the new challenges presented by displacement and migration.

Right now, the world is witnessing the largest displacement crisis since World War II. In ten years, the number of child refugees has more than doubled. Children now make up one in four refugees and migrants crossing the Mediterranean Sea. Many of them arrive in this part of the world as unaccompanied minors, uprooted from their homes and likely to face violence and exploitation.

They often carry traumatic experiences, making them even more vulnerable to drugs. These children cannot be left to fend for themselves. Protecting them has to be a priority for all of us.

The problem of drug abuse knows no borders. In one way or another, it affects every country in the world. This is why international cooperation is so important.

When I travel around the world and meet children and young people living in societies where narcotic drugs and drug abuse are part of their daily lives, my heart bleeds. A society where production, trafficking and consumption of narcotic drugs are an integral part of life is a society marked by poverty, corruption and misery.

So many children around the globe are affected by drug abuse, either because they use drugs themselves at a very early age or because they grow up in a family where drug abuse is a part of their lives. This is something we must take extremely seriously and try our hardest to change. We cannot let narcotic drugs and drug abuse be an accepted part of a young person's day to day life.

We should recognize that some important steps have been taken to reach effective international drug prevention. I like to begin by pointing out three major milestones that have already been reached through international collaborations.

Firstly – An important aspect is the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and in particular article 33, which makes protecting children from drugs a priority. The article reads “State Parties shall take all appropriate measures, including legislative, administrative, social and educational measures, to protect children from the illicit use of narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances as defined in the relevant international treaties, and to prevent the use of children in the illicit production and trafficking of such substances.”

Secondly - The new Sustainability Goals set for 2030 identifies the obligations of all countries regarding Goal 3.5 to “Strengthen the prevention and the treatment of substance abuse, including narcotic drug abuse and harmful use of alcohol.” This sets focus on our global goals regarding drug prevention.

Thirdly- The agreement on International Standards on Drug Use Prevention, led by United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, UNODC, is a major achievement. It is a key strategic step in raising awareness of the importance of evidence-based primary prevention initiatives towards the vision of a drug-free world. Many organizations around the world have contributed to these Standards. The Standards were agreed on at the Special Session of the UN General Assembly in April in New York this year and are now recognized by UN Member States. The Standards builds on work from many international organizations. I see the Standards as a very important step to build up quality programs in different parts of the world.

Prevention of drug abuse involves so much more than just information. We know that stand-alone information activities and campaigns targeting children and young people do not in isolation result in effective prevention. Prevention is much more about strengthening resilience in children and young people to cope with difficulties and instead choose healthy lifestyles. Prevention initiatives must involve caring adults, schools and the whole of society. Successful prevention should be built on sound structure, long-term visions and committed adults.

Effective prevention also includes the promotion of health and social well-being. It is especially important to prevent young people from using drugs. The adolescent brain is more vulnerable than the adult brain to damage caused by drugs. We also know that an early introduction to drugs raises the likelihood of dropout from school.

Substance abuse is preventable. Today, we have better knowledge of what is effective prevention and what should be implemented. We know that prevention is highly cost efficient for the society and that it saves individuals and families from enormous suffering. Policy makers, scientific communities and NGOs, as well as representatives from the social services, health-care and schools, must continue to invest in preventive efforts and to learn what works and what does not. The work must be evidence based, evaluated thoroughly and benefit from the guidance provided by the international standards on prevention. Prevention work must also be culturally sensitive and be adapted to specific context.

It is my strong belief, and that of the Swedish government, that drug policy should focus on prevention, treatment and control, with the aim of reducing both supply of and demand for illegal drugs. And I am convinced that the UN Drug Conventions are the best tools and means available to achieve these aims.

The arguments put forward by the drug liberalization movement cause me a great deal of concern. It worries me, when I hear of young addicted mothers whose babies are born with withdrawal symptoms: shaking and suffering from diarrhea!

Prevention of drug abuse among children and young people has been a primary focus of mine for over 20 years. In 1994, in cooperation with the WHO, I founded Mentor International whose original vision still guides us today. It is to help build a world where children and young people are empowered to make healthy decisions and live free of drugs. In the past 22 years, Mentor has grown into a federation that provides prevention programs in many countries. Children and young people are in need of positive and committed adult role models. Our programs are based on mentoring as a means to provide caring adults that engage with young people and help them navigate through the difficulties and challenges of growing up. We have found that mentoring programs are effective to offer young people support and opportunities to increase their self-esteem and build resilience. The programs empower youth to develop stronger social networks, reflect on their own interests and hopes, and view their futures more positively. All of these outcomes will reduce the likelihood of drug abuse.

There is so much we can do together to help our young people become healthy and fully contributing members of the global community. Collectively, we need to attract the support of more individuals, groups and organizations as we continue to fulfil our mission and expand our endeavors.

I would like to again thank you all and, in closing, urge you to continue your commitment to preventing drug abuse. It has been 22 years since my initial meetings with the World Health Organization that led to the forming of Mentor International. I look positively to the future in what can be accomplished in the years to come.

Our young people are our future and every young person deserves a healthy, prosperous future.

Thank you.