

CND thematic discussions

12 November 2024 (3 – 6PM)

Synthetic Opioids and Non-medical Use of Prescription Drugs

Introductory remarks by Justice Tettey

[Welcome. Pleasure to provide introductory remarks. Thank the Chair of the CND and the secretariat for the opportunity.]

Thank you all for gathering to address the escalating challenges of synthetic opioids and the non-medical use of prescription drugs, both of which have become increasingly complex and pervasive threats to global health and security.

Synthetic opioids, particularly fentanyl, remain at the forefront of the overdose crisis. According to the World Drug Report 2024, in North America alone, fentanyl is linked to nearly 70% of all drug-related deaths, a stark indicator of its devastating potency. Yet fentanyl is only one part of the problem. New, potent opioids such as nitazenes highlight the rapid evolution of synthetic drugs in illicit markets. While initially concentrated in North America, the crisis is expanding to Europe and parts of Asia. Adding to this challenge, the 2023 UNODC Afghanistan Opium Survey reports a 95% decrease in opium poppy cultivation, which is expected to reduce the availability of opium and heroin. This scarcity may drive individuals - and traffickers - toward synthetic opioids, potentially increasing overdose rates.

Simultaneously, the non-medical use of pharmaceutical drugs, including opioids, benzodiazepines, and stimulants, continues to rise. In regions where regulatory oversight may be limited, individuals sometimes misuse prescription drugs for

self-medication or to amplify the effects of other substances. Youth are particularly susceptible, and women now represent nearly 43% of non-medical pharmaceutical opioid users, yet they remain significantly underserved.

The UNODC's Synthetic Drug Strategy 2021–2025 provides a framework for action to address synthetic drugs through four strategic spheres of action: 1) fostering multilateralism, 2) enhancing early warning systems to anticipate synthetic drug crises, 3) promoting science-informed health responses, and 4) strengthening counternarcotic capacities to disrupt trafficking.

The Early Warning Advisory on new psychoactive substances (NPS) is central to detecting threats. It supports real time information sharing, helping countries detect trends and respond swiftly, which is crucial in the volatile synthetic drug market.

While 142 countries contribute, data gaps reveal the need for improved collaboration to maximize the system's potential.

Strengthening the capacity of national drug testing laboratories to generate quality scientific data is an essential element of effective early warning leading to most appropriate responses that take into account specific social dynamics and regional drug patterns. Advances in AI offer new tools for data analysis and trend prediction, enhancing this system further.

However, innovation alone won't resolve these challenges. Despite rising overdose rates and the proliferation of synthetic drugs, including synthetic opioids, treatment access remains inadequate. Globally, only 1 in 11 people with drug use disorders receives treatment, and the disparities are even more pronounced among marginalized groups, with only 1 in 18 women receiving the care they need.

The CHAMPS initiative offers a vital prevention framework, focusing on children's social and emotional development to reduce future drug use risks.

In this context, it will also become crucial to ensure access to and availability of controlled medicines (or controlled synthetics for medical and scientific purposes), while preventing their diversion and non-medical use. More than 80% of the global population lives in countries that do not provide adequate access and addressing this situation is not only at the core of the commitments of the Conventions, it will also prevent the fuelling of illicit markets by people that do not access the medicines and the care they need in the health system.

Additionally, immediate action on overdose prevention through availability of naloxone is crucial. UNODC will continue to implement its S.O.S. initiative, bridging these gaps in health services and overdose prevention to reducing the most adverse impacts.

To further support the implementation of the synthetic drug strategy, the UN tool kit on synthetic drugs gathers more than 500 practical resources from the across the UN system including WHO and INCB. The toolkit has now over 200,000 users worldwide and its resources are organized into 15 specialized modules available in all 6 UN official languages.

Tackling synthetic opioids and the non-medical use of prescription drugs demands strong international cooperation, as substances like fentanyl and nitazenes pose global risks. Criminal networks exploit legal and governance gaps across regions, emphasizing the need for Member States to address these challenges collectively.

To support these efforts, UNODC is launching new initiatives: the International Network of Legislators on Drugs (INLOD) aims to bridge legislative expertise gaps by fostering collaboration among parliamentarians, while Justices United against Synthetics Trafficking (JUST) will equip judges and prosecutors in at-risk countries with the tools and resources needed to handle synthetic opioid trafficking cases effectively.

Our response to synthetic drugs, including opioids and prescription drug misuse must be multifaceted, with stronger early warning systems, enhanced international cooperation, effective legislation and prosecution of drug trafficking, counternarcotics capacity as well as adequate access to treatment and to controlled substances for medical and scientific purposes. Success relies on cross-sector collaboration and science-based, human rights-centred policies.

Let's forge stronger partnerships and leverage our resources to build resilient communities, protect public health, and create a safer, more just world. Together, we can meet these challenges and make a real impact.

Thank you.