

---

# Report of the Expert Working Group on Improving Drug Statistics and Strengthening of the Annual Report Questionnaire (ARQ)

Vienna, 29–31 January 2018

## I. Introduction

In its Resolution 60/1 of March 2017, the Commission on Narcotic Drugs (CND) highlighted the importance of strengthening data reporting mechanisms, including by identifying gaps in the current drug statistics and by exploring possibilities to support countries to strengthen existing data collection and analysis tools at the national level. The CND further invited UNODC, in close cooperation with Member States, to reflect on possibilities to strengthen and streamline its existing data-collection and analysis tools, including improving the quality and effectiveness of the annual report questionnaire (ARQ). Strengthening the production and collection of accurate, reliable and comparable statistical data on drugs is a crucial element in the overall strategy to address the drug problem.

UNODC convened an Experts Consultation on January 29–31, as a step to exploring options for responding to CND Resolution 60/1. The meeting was attended by experts from 52 countries including: Angola, Argentina, Armenia, Austria, Bahamas, Bahrain, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Burkina Faso, Canada, China, Colombia, Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Gambia, Germany, Ghana, Greece, Guatemala, Hungary, Italy, Jamaica, Jordan, Kenya, Lebanon, Malaysia, Mexico, Micronesia (Federated States of), Moldova, Namibia, Nepal, Norway, Oman, Pakistan, Peru, Philippines, Poland, Portugal, Republic of Korea, Romania, Russia, Senegal, Singapore, Slovenia, Spain, Sri Lanka, Sweden, Switzerland, Thailand, Tunisia, Turkey, and the United Kingdom). Representatives of the following international and regional organisations also attended the meeting: EMCDDA, INCB, OHCHR, UNAIDS and WHO. The following countries provided financial contributions for the preparation and organisation of the meeting: Finland, Germany, the Netherlands and Norway.

## II. Organization of the meeting

The objectives of the meeting were:

- i. To review statistical methodology, tools and capacity development activities to improve the capacity of countries to collect and report data on drugs;
- ii. To discuss the quality of data currently collected through the ARQ and possible ways for improvement.

Specifically, national experts were tasked with: identifying and prioritizing new methodological and capacity needs at national level; exploring options for improving the response rates, completeness and consistency of reporting through the ARQs; and streamlining and reducing the reporting burden on countries. Experts also considered ways to meet the information needs indicated by the 2009 Political Declaration and Plan of Action on International Cooperation towards an Integrated and Balanced Strategy to Counter the World Drug Problem and the UNGASS Outcome Document ([A/RES/S-30/1](#), Annex) which recalled the importance to improve statistical data and information on a number of emerging topics, such as new psychoactive substances.

Two background documents were prepared by the UNODC Research and Trends Analysis Branch to facilitate the technical discussion by national experts:<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> All relevant documents are available at: <http://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and->

- Background paper I: Improving national drug statistics systems. This paper discussed existing challenges faced at national level in the production of drug statistics and possible activities to support national authorities in improving quality and availability of data on drugs, with a focus on the development of new methodological tools and activities of capacity-building.
- Background paper II: Technical assessment of the Annual Report Questionnaire (ARQ). The technical analyses considered issues related to availability, quality, relevance and use of data and other information annually collected through the ARQ. The assessment was informed by feedback provided by member states and other stakeholders through completion of an online questionnaire prior to the meeting. Based on this assessment, a number of issues were identified for consideration by national experts.

### **III. Outcome of the meeting**

#### **A. Improving national drug statistics: needs and challenges**

In this session participants focused on challenges that exist across countries in the area of drug statistics and on possible ways to address them. During the opening discussion, experts observed that production of data on drugs should address national information needs while recognizing that some aspects of the drug problem are best understood from a regional/global perspective. They also agreed that countries have different priorities in relation to information needs and this might impact on the resources they allocate to data collection activities.

Before addressing the statistical challenges in the areas of drug supply and drug demand, some cross-cutting challenges were identified. These include: the complexity of measuring a hidden phenomenon such as illegal activities related to drugs; the fact that data based on administrative records reflect only the portion of activities or persons that are in contact with public institutions or services; the lack of methodological standards in a number of areas; the lack of technical capacity in a highly specialized and rapidly evolving area; the challenges of coordinating several stakeholders at the national level; and the need to produce gender-sensitive data and data on vulnerable population groups.

The statistical and organisational framework in place in each country plays a crucial role in promoting national data collection and analysis initiatives, such as national observatories on drugs. Participants underlined the challenges in terms of integrating information and fostering coordination among several agencies within the national system, challenges which can significantly hinder national capacity to produce complete and high-quality data. Experts further highlighted the importance of establishing national, regional and global networks in fostering the production and use of consistent, comprehensive and comparable data, and of providing a forum for sharing of best practices and for peer support. Participants also underlined the importance of establishing national drug observatories that can set up and coordinate information systems to collect and analyse data on all facets of the drug problem in the country.

In this regard, experts agreed that developing national coordination systems or networks, with focal points from the different national agencies, is needed to make maximum use of the information at the national and sub-national levels, while addressing the requirements of regional and global data systems. Additionally, participants agreed that Member States should be provided with guidelines, methodologies and standardized definitions for the production and analysis of data to meet their national needs.

---

[analysis/statistics/expert-consultation-on-arq.html](#).

---

The meeting discussed methodological challenges and issues encountered when collecting drug demand and drug supply related data respectively, and to identify capacity-building needs for Member States.

### **Drug supply data**

The discussion of drug supply data was divided into a) the identification and development of methodological guidelines and b) identification of activities to develop/enhance national capacities.

#### *Methodological guidelines*

The discussion on this issue focused on four main topics: price and purity, seizures, illicit crop cultivation and the detection of clandestine laboratories, and wastewater analysis.

With regard to price and purity, a challenge identified by experts was the differentiation between wholesale and retail prices. Experts underlined that different sources of data, ranging from intelligence information to test purchases or laboratory analysis, are used when reporting on price and purity data. This variety in sources can hinder the consistency and comparability of data. It was suggested that best practices guidelines and standard estimation methodologies be developed for collecting and reporting data related to price and purity.

With regard to drug seizures, discussions highlighted that the definitions of “origin” (country of production/manufacture), departure and transit countries would need to be clarified as they may be subject to different interpretations at country level. Concerns were expressed about the accuracy of data on drug seizures, due to issues such as inaccurate measuring equipment, or lack of training of law enforcement officers in charge of reporting on the field. The identification of seized substances and of their purity can be challenging for forensic laboratories in some Member States. Some experts also underlined the importance of having methodologies in place for reporting on controlled deliveries operations, and the modus operandi of traffickers. The compilation of good practices for the analysis of this indicator was proposed.

With regard to illicit crop cultivation and clandestine laboratories, several methodological and technical challenges were identified in the area of assessing illicit crop cultivation. Participants highlighted the need to develop guidelines on how to establish a national system for monitoring illicit crop cultivation.

Experts also identified the need for standardized definitions in terms of the different types of clandestine laboratories, as well as for developing methodologies for the estimation of the producing capacity of such laboratories.

Wastewater analysis: while experts recognized the value of waste water analysis as a complementary method to understand the drug market, they were in agreement that the methodology needs further developments before methodological guidelines can be produced.

#### *Capacity development*

Experts identified a number of areas where capacity development is required. These include forensic capacities in the analysis of drugs, alternative development, inter-agency coordination and harmonization among agencies producing data on supply, training of all actors involved in the data collection process, the interpretation and analysis of data, and the establishment of national drugs observatories of focal points from relevant national agencies.

### **Drug demand data**

In this area, drug use, prevention and treatment services were identified as areas in need of further methodological guidance. Surveys on drug use are the main tool to produce data on prevalence of drug use. While they can produce a range of valuable information, they can be affected by issues of undercounting, especially for certain drug types, because of difficulties in covering some hidden populations and the reluctance to disclose the use of drugs, due to stigma or other issues. Furthermore, the cost and complexity of such surveys may hinder their implementation on a regular basis, especially in developing countries. Therefore, while these types of surveys remain a significant part of the national statistical system on drug use, complementary methods need to be explored. In this vein, experts supported the implementation of less costly methodologies, such as rapid assessments, risk assessments, wastewater analysis, and the use of indirect estimation methods based on the triangulation of available sources such as administrative data and treatment records, as instruments that can complement drug surveys to produce metrics on drug use. Experts also considered the use of the Internet and handheld devices as cost-effective solutions to population surveys.

Experts highlighted the need for methodologies, guidelines and a clear terminology on treatment modalities, on drug identification methods, and on the prioritization of questions in surveys regardless of differences in national capabilities. A lack of incentives for national and local institutions and staff to actively participate in the collection of drug use data was identified, and the need to explore alternative ways to create incentives that increase participation was highlighted.

Additionally, participants identified a list of necessary elements that drug information systems should contain. This list includes data on access to pain medication, mainstream information related to drug use and provision of services within the criminal justice information system, and information on a broad range of care alternatives in treatment, among others. Experts also highlighted the need for an improved measurement of quality and coverage of prevention and treatment services, the development of an information system that is able to measure the impact rather than only the processes, and an increased granularity of the information sources that allows for the analysis of gender disparity and vulnerable population groups.

Experts also highlighted the value of Early Warning Systems to track new threats and dramatic changes in domestic drug markets.

Participants underlined the necessity to improve the coordination among all agencies involved in drug prevention from local to national level in order to centralize the data on prevention services at national level.

Experts also identified the need to update existing guidelines for drug epidemiology, and to develop the following related tools: operational modules for capacity-building to support countries; guidelines on undertaking household surveys on drug use, addressing issues of undercounting due to stigma related to drug use; guidelines on indirect methods of estimation, including modelling aspects; and guidelines for studies in prisons. Additionally, participants highlighted the importance of regional networking and peer support for countries in this field.

## **B. Improving and strengthening the Annual Report Questionnaire (ARQ)**

During the initial discussion on this topic, some of the main challenges and areas for improvement for the ARQ were presented. The main challenges include low response rates in certain geographical regions, the length of the questionnaire itself, the lack of relevance of specific questions or sections for some countries, and the lack of generally accepted definitions and classifications in some subjects. Certain areas for improvement were identified, and these included data on vulnerable groups and gender sensitivity, user-friendliness, capturing emerging data needs such as new

---

psychoactive substances (NPS) and the data requirements for monitoring the SDG indicator 3.5.1, links with organized crime, data on socioeconomic indicators, and the emergence of darknet trafficking, among others.

After the initial discussion, the meeting was structured around simultaneous working groups and plenary discussions. The main conclusions from the thematic discussions were as follows.

## **DATA/INFORMATION ON DRUG DEMAND**

### **Drug use, drug use prevention, treatment and SDGs**

Regarding prevalence of drug use, it was agreed that standard prevalence data for adults and youth remain essential indicators to understand drug use. Common and easily available information should be requested in the annual component of the questionnaire, while more detailed and disaggregated information could be requested in the rotating modules. Participants identified the need to obtain qualitative assessments of poly-drug use, and to define broader categories of drugs.

Experts also suggested that data on socioeconomic risk factors for drug use be collected as part of the rotating modules of the questionnaire. Such data could be used to address vulnerabilities of high-risk groups. Participants recognized that such vulnerabilities might vary across, and even within, countries. It was recommended that an Expert Group Meeting be set up to explore what already exists in other mechanisms, and establish what other additional information the ARQ could collect.

With regard to NPS, experts agreed that the ARQ should collect data on use of NPS and emerging drugs.<sup>2</sup>

With regard to treatment and severe drug use, experts suggested that questions on service delivery be reviewed, so as to collect all available information at the country level, disaggregating between subnational and national level data. The establishment of an inter-agency working group to explore and harmonize terminology and definitions, and to discuss the methodology for size estimation of the population in need of treatment, was suggested.

The importance of understanding the context and representation of reported data on treatment was highlighted. Experts suggested the inclusion of questions on pathway of referral. Participants underlined the importance of collecting data on the absolute number of people in treatment, but also identified the need to complement this information on the quality and type of treatment. It was considered that the methodology of estimation and reporting for SDG 3.5.1 should be discussed in the inter-agency working group.

With respect to high-risk groups, while participants recognized that prevalence data for all high-risk groups may not be available at a national level, they also identified a need for improvement in the way data is collected in the ARQ.

Experts supported the collection of data on services provided to high-risk groups, and recommended the use of United Nations terminology for naming high-risk groups. Participants agreed that there should be a specific module for prison, which looks at the information in the prison as well as the availability and coverage of services, and that detailed information on prisons and treatment can be collected periodically as part of the rotating section of the questionnaire. A need to have relevant information by gender and vulnerable groups was identified for data related to the different aspects of services available.

With regard to prevention, experts suggested that the set of questions on prevention be included in the rotating modules of the questionnaire, to be reported every second year. The general issue of coordination among various national and sub-national entities was identified as particularly relevant to indicators on prevention.

---

<sup>2</sup> See section on NPS under “Cross-cutting issues”.

Experts suggested that the list of drug use prevention services in the ARQ, as well as the age groups and the risk levels, be expanded or modified as necessary to reflect the UNODC international standards for drug use prevention and to allow for monitoring the SDG objective of strengthening the country-level drug prevention policies. Finally, experts stressed the importance of reporting on the quality of drug use prevention interventions in the ARQ, possibly drawing from the experience of regional organizations such as the EMCDDA.

### **Health consequences of drug use: morbidity and mortality**

The experts highlighted the difficulty in reporting on morbidity related to drug use in prison. Participants suggested broadening data collection on morbidity to cover morbidity in drug users in general, rather than focusing only on people who inject drugs. They also suggested strengthening the current questions on non-fatal overdose and emergency rooms visits, while making them part of the rotating part of the ARQ.

With respect to mortality, experts agreed on the need to strengthen data collection on fatal overdose prevention in the ARQ. Experts stressed the importance of continuing to report on direct drug-related deaths (mainly overdoses), while underlining the need for a mechanism of low-cost capacity-building on reporting on such deaths in the countries. Participants also identified the need for further discussion and collaboration between UNODC and WHO to estimate global (direct and indirect) drug related deaths. In particular, a modelling approach is needed for most of the indirect drug related deaths based on attributable fractions.

Experts highlighted the need for further disaggregation of data on morbidity and mortality by gender. They also suggested that the ARQ adopts a flexible approach in order to improve the response rate across indicators and measures, so that every country can at least report some basic information on drug morbidity and mortality.

### **Access to pain medication**

While the reporting on access to pain medication is reflected in a number of policy documents, it was not clear to experts how this should be done in practice. Participants suggested that UNODC, INCB and WHO coordinate to assess the needs for reporting on access to pain medication, whether these needs are currently met, and, if not, whether the ARQ could be a mechanism to ensure additional data collection.

## **DATA/INFORMATION ON DRUG SUPPLY**

### **Seizures**

Several issues with the current design of the question were brought up, including the variety of standard and non-standard of units of measurement that Member States use for reporting the amounts seized. Given this large variety, experts suggested that the layout of the question be reorganized in order to account for units of weight, units of volume, consumption units and ad-hoc units of measurement. Other issues that were raised in relation to the reporting of seized amounts could also be improved with a better layout and the inclusion of more specific metadata questions. Experts concluded that seized amounts of drugs should belong to the annual part of the questionnaire.

Participants also agreed on the importance of including a question that allows for the disaggregation of cases by size, especially with the view of obtaining disaggregated data for the different levels of sale. It was also noted that these questions should be asked with a periodicity lower than annual, and therefore be included in the rotating modules of the questionnaire.

In relation to trafficking routes and modes of transportation, experts agreed that questions on these subjects should be collected annually. Many participants recognized significant difficulties in establishing the country of manufacture, and the possibility of merging the country of manufacture and departure as one “country of

---

origin” was discussed. It was agreed that the definitions and instructions could be reviewed to ensure clarity and simplicity.

Experts also examined the possibility to include the collection of data on NPS seizures in the ARQ.<sup>3</sup>

### **Price and purity**

The group agreed on the importance of price and purity information and hence agreed to keep these questions as part of the annual component of the questionnaire. In particular, the need for more specific metadata on the sources of information for prices was highlighted, with a necessity to differentiate between those estimates based on data collection and those based on intelligence or expert opinions. Participants also suggested more detailed instructions in order to capture the conceptual differences in purity across drug types. Representatives noted that purity data may become available when special studies are conducted in their respective countries and the need to capture such studies in the ARQ was underlined.

It was also suggested to incorporate data collection at the transactional, case-by-case level, that includes both purity and price information to facilitate the estimation of purity-adjusted prices. Many representatives underlined the fact that such data is not available in many countries. It was suggested not to include this question in the ARQ, but to explore the possibility to collect this data on an ad-hoc basis.

### **Cultivation, production and manufacture of drugs**

Questions 58 to 65 in the current ARQ were deemed as being too technical and detailed and it was suggested that they be moved to the rotating modules of the questionnaire. It was suggested that the question on the detection of clandestine laboratories be kept as part of the annual component of the questionnaire. Experts highlighted the need for clearer terminology, further disaggregation, and improved metadata collection.

### **Monitoring of supply reduction responses**

This issue is currently addressed in Part II of the ARQ. While the response rates to questions monitoring measures put in place by countries to address supply reduction are relatively high in comparison with other sections, experts agreed that many of these questions do not adequately enable monitoring of the progress of supply reduction responses by Member States. It was agreed that a review of this section is necessary. With regard to the frequency of reporting on this issue, that is, annual versus rotating, experts agreed that this should be determined after an evaluation of the burden of reporting on member states resulting from the revision of the existing questions. Experts also noted the importance linking periodicity of reporting to an existing strategy.

## **LINKS WITH OTHER ILLICIT ACTIVITIES**

### **Links between drug trafficking and other forms of organized crime**

Experts recognized the interlinkages between drug trafficking and other forms of organized crime, including, but not limited to, money-laundering, terrorism, trafficking in firearms and human trafficking. They further recognized the importance of monitoring such linkages in order to gain a better understanding of the drug situation. It was noted that while some countries have been able to develop mechanisms to monitor these interlinkages and to report on them, there were practical challenges such as the intelligence and law-enforcement sensitive nature of such information. Experts also noted the need to have clarity in the definitions and terminologies used in this context e.g. definition of “terrorist groups”. Notwithstanding these challenges, experts were in agreement on the value of

---

<sup>3</sup> See section on NPS under “Cross-cutting issues”.

proceeding with defining a process of measuring the links between drug trafficking and organized crime.

#### **Data/information on drug related criminal activities using the Internet, money-laundering and illicit financial flows**

Participants agreed that the use of the Internet for drug trafficking and selling is a growing phenomenon and should be properly monitored. The inclusion of data on the use of the Internet in the ARQ was seen as important by all experts but there were problems seen in how to identify proper indicators to measure this.

All countries represented in this group reported having specific agencies or units within the police who track cybercrime activities and monitor the Internet. In most cases the scope of such monitoring is much wider than only drugs, as several other criminal offences can occur in cyberspace (firearms, trafficking in persons, etc.).

One possible solution to monitoring the use of the Internet for drug selling activities was seen in the end point of the transaction, that is, at the point of the physical delivery of drug parcels through postal service or private couriers. Some countries work closely with their postal service and customs authority to identify suspicious parcels. As a result, the number of detected drug parcels, and their origin and destination were seen as important indicators for the ARQ, possibly with inclusion of information on the link with Internet-based transactions. The inclusion of information on new types of substances — NPS — was also seen as important.

The potential use of data based on drug users reports on the channel or method used to purchase drugs should also be explored.

All participants reported that their countries have relevant laws in place to detect, prosecute and convict persons for money-laundering, including for cases related to drug trafficking. Furthermore, they have specialized units/institutions dealing with illicit financial transactions (e.g. Financial Information Units, Anti-Money-laundering units) which also produce relevant data of general nature.

Information currently collected in the ARQ focus on legislative and institutional framework on money-laundering. This information is not subject to frequent changes or updates and therefore has limited analytical value to monitor forms and patterns of money-laundering related offences. These questions could be replaced with a shorter set of questions focusing on data about investigations, prosecution, convictions related to money-laundering connected to drug trafficking offences and on the value or number of asset confiscations and seizures for money-laundering offences related to drug trafficking. Information could also be collected, periodically, on studies, reports or publications that examine patterns and trends of money-laundering related to drug trafficking at country level.

#### **DRUGS AND THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM**

The discussion focused on data collected on the criminal justice system in connection with drugs. While the response rate is relatively high for this section, there are some limitations in the interpretation of the data as it currently stands in the ARQ.

A first issue discussed was the disaggregation of drug law offenders by citizenship. While in some countries the proportion of individuals involved in drug offences that are of foreign nationality is relatively low, other Member States tend to have different experiences in this respect, and such information can shed light on the situation of populations at risk. Given this situation, participants agreed that this question could be considered as part of rotating modules of the questionnaire, and that data on citizenship of drug offenders could be further disaggregated by drug type.

A significant part of the discussion focused around how to map the transit of drug offences through the criminal justice system. Experts considered that it is important to collect data on drug-related offences through the various stages of the justice

---

system, including information related to alternative sanctions (treatment, social community work, and other types according to national context).

Participants discussed the following five categories as a way to map the transit of drug offences: persons brought into formal contact for drug use/trafficking; persons prosecuted for drug use/trafficking; persons convicted for drug use/trafficking; persons incarcerated for drug use/trafficking; and alternative sanctions (five most common typologies, followed by an open-ended question), formulating the questions by taking into account that alternative sanctions can be delivered at various stages of the justice system and by different authorities (administrative and criminal justice).

Such data would be disaggregated by age and sex, and would incorporate a distinction between administrative and criminal sanctions in the most appropriate way. Two delegations expressed reservations about the advisability of the above five categories. The inclusion of information about the provision of legal aid was also discussed.

Experts agreed that this section will be tested before any final decisions are made on the specific questions. Participants highlighted the need to consider the countries' abilities to respond to the section during this evaluation phase.

In terms of the specific data that could be collected, it was proposed that the following data could be requested in the annual component of the questionnaire: number of persons brought into formal contact with the criminal justice system for drug law offences, for each drug type, respectively for drug possession and for drug trafficking, and maintaining a clear distinction between administrative and criminal cases.

All other topics relevant to the criminal justice system could be covered in dedicated modules, on a rotating basis.

## **ALTERNATIVE DEVELOPMENT AND FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO ILLICIT CROP CULTIVATION**

There was agreement that the current set of questions on Alternative Development (currently in Part 2 of the ARQ) should be reviewed to ensure more clarity on the overall objective, and to structure the questions into one component intended for countries affected by illicit crop cultivation and another one targeting donor countries. The recommendation was made that this section of the ARQ should aim to provide a global picture on the extent and impact of Alternative Development and also help in identifying country priorities. There was also suggestion that the value of "yes/no" questions could be enhanced by follow-up questions probing for substantiation in cases of affirmative answers.

There was extensive discussion on the best ways to measure alternative development and its impact, and recognition that the focus should extend beyond the area under illicit cultivation to include socioeconomic indicators and aspects related to gender, cultural context (especially in the case of indigenous communities) and environment, and to establish the link with the Sustainable Development Goals. At the same time, there were open questions concerning the capacity of countries to report such data and hence the feasibility of collecting such data at international level.

There was also a suggestion to include a question addressing the perception of the impact of alternative development measures.

The discussion of "annual" versus "rotating" modules of the ARQ highlighted the fact that alternative development is one topic which affects different countries in different ways and to varying degrees, and that this could be taken into account when designating questions as "annual" or "rotating" (with the more detailed questions in the rotating component).

The question was raised as to whether the questions on alternative development should extend to rural development interventions, a distinction which carries a very large impact on the scope of the interventions being covered. The question was also raised as to how "development-oriented interventions" in a drugs context can be addressed in the new ARQ, in view of the mention of such initiatives in the UNGASS

outcome document, as well as “sustainable urban development initiatives” (paras. 7i, j, k). Development work with prisoners was given as an example; however one delegation expressed reservations about the inclusion of this topic.

### **CROSS-CUTTING ISSUES**

Discussions on cross-cutting issues covered a number of possible changes to the design and process of the ARQ. Experts agreed on a modular approach with “annual” and “rotating” parts of the ARQ. The proper periodicity of the rotating parts would need to be determined by the nature of the data, such as whether the indicator describes phenomena that change more or less frequently. This would make it appropriate to the needs of countries with different levels of data availability and capacity. It is important that the ARQ is equally appropriate to countries with both limited and developed information systems. Such a modular format could increase the number of countries able to report, and support the development of reporting capacity over time. However care should be taken to avoid the perception that some sections of the ARQ are not important.

Experts agreed to structure the ARQ modules according to homogenous topics (such as seizures, prison issues etc.) to facilitate the overall management of the questionnaire for responding countries. This revision should also bring about improved functionality (such as the option to reflect multiple comments from various institutions), better layout of the tables and enhanced user-friendliness.

In addition to the modular approach, another strategy that met with consensus as a way to ensure that the ARQ caters for the needs of all countries was to facilitate, across all indicators, the submission of relevant data or information from specialized, localized, qualitative or fragmented information even when this is not in conformity with the ideal data requirements expected in the standard question formulations. This could be achieved for example through built-in mechanisms for the inclusion of specialized studies or references thereto. A related improvement that was suggested in various contexts was the adoption of stepwise approaches starting from the most general questions and conditionally moving to more specific and disaggregated data. For example, data on prisoners in general could be requested first in the relevant section, followed by more detailed questions on morbidity, and on morbidity in drug users in prison.

Following the practice of the annual United Nations Crime Trends Survey (UN-CTS), also administered by UNODC to collect data on crime and criminal justice, experts recognized that appointments of national focal points would facilitate an improvement in ARQ reporting. The Focal Points would facilitate the channelling of the questionnaire to the right institution, improve the timeliness of the response and allow direct questions and feedback on the data. In addition, the Focal Points could also act as liaison with regional bodies that collect data on drugs such as CICAD in the Americas or EMCDDA in Europe. These Focal Points could act as a direct link between UNODC and the responding institutions, while keeping the official communication channels (Ministries of Foreign Affairs through their Permanent Missions) continuously informed.

Considering the reporting burden on countries, experts felt that it would be useful in the medium term to explore joint data collection with regional bodies on drug data, as is currently the case with crime data in the UN-CTS.

Experts also agreed that the ARQ needs to be reviewed to ensure that questions adequately take into account the gender dimension, in particular by means of gender-disaggregation, wherever relevant. Moreover the ARQ needs to systematically make provision for data on vulnerable groups, including local, focused and qualitative studies.

---

### **New psychoactive substances**

One topic that arose repeatedly throughout the discussions was the issue of refining the Annual Report Questionnaire so as to cater for the collection of data relative to new psychoactive substances (NPS). NPS were also explicitly included as stand-alone items in the topics covered by the working groups on drug demand (working group C.1) and supply (working group C.2).

There was general recognition that NPS represent an important new area which warrants data collection, and that the current ARQ does not adequately cater for this need. Discussions dwelt on how to address this gap in the data collection through the ARQ, and explored how to incorporate the appropriate categories in the ARQ.

In the discussion on drug use, experts suggested the inclusion of aggregated data on NPS within the annual component of the questionnaire, with an extended module to be used in addition on a rotating basis. Participants also identified a need for the standardization of terms and methods in order to distinguish between traditional drugs and NPS, and to develop guidelines to collect information on NPS use through surveys or other types of sources. In the discussion on drug supply, experts examined the possibility to include the collection of data on NPS seizures in the ARQ. While these data were deemed to be very relevant, experts did not provide concrete suggestions on how this data collection could be done, given the dynamic and complex nature of the NPS market.

There was general appreciation of the complexity of the issue, and some differences emerged in the nature of available data, as well as data needs, when comparing supply data and demand data. Whereas the former are typically supported by administrative records and forensics, the latter rely to a large extent on self-assessed and self-reported information from drug users; thus reliable supply data may be available at a higher degree of granularity and specificity than demand data. Moreover, certain important indicators on the demand side, such as prevalence, do not easily lend themselves to aggregation from specific to broad categories of substances, in contrast to indicators such as seizures. Hence, on the demand side, identifying the appropriate breadth of the categories (the right levels of aggregation) becomes crucial. However, experts agreed that the ARQ should collect data relevant to NPS and it could still achieve overall coherence in the questions across the different thematic areas, even if the categorizations used are not identical.

A related issue was the need to revise and improve the current classification of various categories of drugs in the ARQ and to harmonize categories used with other international bodies carrying out data collection on drugs to avoid inconsistent answers and reduce response burdens. For any revised categorization, there is a need to balance the analytical value of categories with the response burden and the data available at the level of the countries. A particular challenge in defining appropriate categories was seen especially in view of the fact that there are currently more than 650 identified, substances which are constantly evolving and being exchanged with new drug types. Participants agreed that it would be advisable to introduce some flexibility in the definition of drug categories used by UNODC, based on newly identified substances and trends. Experts suggested to have broader categories within the ARQ but leave the concrete inclusions and definitions of these categories to an external guidance document.

### **Other cross-cutting issues**

Experts agreed that national information systems should follow the quality, confidentiality and scientific standards as reflected in the United Nations Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics.

Other cross-cutting issues discussed by participants were the possibility to move towards a system of online reporting (entering the data directly in a web-based reporting tool) which has some desirable features but requires substantial resources to implement. Participants also pointed to the need for improved guidelines on how

to fill in certain parts, for example on the use of indicators and other sources (such as expert assessments) to answer certain questions that allow multiple sources.

Another request from participants who are also data providers is the need to have a revised ARQ instrument a year or more in advance before the reporting deadline, to allow countries the collection of the data. It was agreed that the revision of the questionnaire would take enough time to enable countries to do this, as a revised ARQ should also be tested and adopted by the CND.

In order to improve compliance to the reporting exercise, experts suggested that targeted capacity-building modules supported by appropriate tools, should be developed to support any proposed structural changes to the ARQ.

Experts highlighted the need to consult with all appropriate international and regional stakeholders to ensure developments in this area (ARQ and other relevant data collection activities) are efficient, avoid duplication of efforts and better meet international commitments, such as the pursuit of the Sustainable Development Goals. In this context, experts noted the need to continue the dialogue within the International Technical Working Group on Drug Epidemiology Statistics as this could have implications for the content of the ARQ.

One recommendation that arose in numerous discussions was the need to refine the metadata questions throughout the questionnaire; the metadata questions should be appropriately structured in such a way to capture the methodological and other crucial aspects which experience has shown to be the limiting factors in the usefulness and interpretability of the data, for example: whether a certain estimate was the outcome of a data collection exercise or else based on intelligence and the coverage of services such as treatment and prevention.

The issue of questions specifically requesting expert assessments was also discussed in various working groups. While such questions were identified as important by many participants, there was consensus that the responses should not be based on one person's opinions, but should follow a structured approach incorporating the opinion of a number of experts. There is a need to provide robust methodologies, guidelines and instructions on how to obtain this type of estimates. Additionally, detailed and specific metadata should be collected clarifying the methodology used in the construction of expert assessment estimates.

The need for methodological guidelines also arose in several contexts and this may warrant the development of fully-fledged, stand-alone documents on filling in the ARQ (taking into account any revisions). Several discussions also brought out the need for clearer and more prominent definitions, instructions and examples. Some experts also emphasized the need for the ARQ to clearly point out that the responses to certain sections, such as the section on alternative development, will require input from multiple data providers within the same country. In addition, several working groups discussed the need for capacity-building efforts, including training, specifically on compiling the responses to the ARQ.

Experts recognized the need to further explore technical solutions to the issues identified by them to strengthen and streamline the ARQ and to ensure it continues to meet information needs. Expert cautioned that countries that provide a wealth of information should not be singled out as having a bigger drug problem than those who do not provide data.