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BACKGROUND PAPER

Topic: “Adressing the misuse and illegal trade of natural drugs and reproductive rights.”

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UNODC

Chair and Moderator names

Mauricio Hernández Antillón, José Andrés Gasca Mendoza.

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Committee Background

Since 1997, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) has worked to make the world safer from drugs, crime, terrorism, and corruption.

UNODC is active in over 150 countries and promotes international cooperation, provides reliable data, and trains judges, police, border officials, and social workers to strengthen safety and resilience in communities worldwide.

Introduction of the Topic



Natural drugs such as coca, poppy, and cannabis are rarely sold in their raw form within illegal drug markets. Instead, they are transformed into far more potent and profitable derivatives.

For instance, coca leaves are processed into cocaine through complex chemical procedures, while poppy latex is refined into morphine and later into heroin. Cannabis is manipulated to produce concentrates like hashish or oils with high THC levels. These derivations not only increase the commercial value of the substances but also intensify their psychoactive effects, driving demand in illicit markets.

Furthermore, the transformation of natural drugs into stronger derivatives complicates the work of authorities, as each stage of the process introduces new legal, health, and logistical risks.

These transformations increase potency and market value, fueling global demand and complicating enforcement. It has a direct impact on public health and law enforcement.



Evolution of the Topic

For centuries, natural drugs such as coca, opium, poppy, and cannabis were used in traditional medicine, spiritual rituals, and cultural practices across Latin America, Asia, and Africa. Coca leaves were chewed for stamina and altitude resistance, poppy latex was used for pain relief and sedation, and cannabis served both therapeutic and religious functions. These substances were traded locally and regionally, often without stigma or regulation. The first international concern arose with the 1909 Shanghai Opium Commission, which gathered 13 countries to address the growing opium trade and laid the groundwork for future global drug control.

The 1912 International Opium Convention marked the beginning of formal drug control, later expanded by the 1961 Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs, which criminalized the cultivation and distribution of derivatives like cocaine and heroin. These legal shifts transformed natural drug use into a global criminal issue. During the 1970s and 1980s, transnational trafficking networks emerged in Colombia, Mexico, Afghanistan, and Southeast Asia, refining coca into cocaine and opium into heroin. These cartels exploited weak governance, rural poverty, and rising demand in the U.S. and Europe, leading to widespread violence, corruption, and international enforcement challenges.

Since the 1990s, traffickers have adopted advanced chemical techniques to produce more potent derivatives, such as high THC cannabis oils, ultra-refined heroin, and new cocaine forms. The 1988 UN Convention Against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs strengthened international cooperation, but traffickers adapted quickly, using encrypted communication, synthetic additives, and decentralized production hubs. Digital platforms now facilitate global distribution, while demand continues to rise in both developed and developing countries. These transformations have intensified public health risks, overwhelmed legal systems, and complicated international enforcement efforts.

External Actions

Since the early 1960s, the international community has pursued a strategy to address the misuse and illicit trade of natural drugs. The Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs (1961) established that production, trade, and use of narcotics such as coca, opium, and cannabis must be limited exclusively to medical and scientific purposes. This treaty laid the foundation for global cooperation and strict control mechanisms to combat drug trafficking.

In contrast, the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD, 1994) marked a major turning point in global policy. It reframed development around reproductive health, women's empowerment, and gender equality, recognizing these as essential to human rights and sustainable progress.

Both issues, drug control and reproductive rights, are supported by the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which promote health, equality, and responsible regulation worldwide. Together, these frameworks allow countries to coordinate efforts that combine public health, human rights, and international cooperation.





Committee Focus

The UNODC aims to craft balanced and collaborative approaches to tackle the illicit trade of natural drugs, while upholding human rights and safeguarding public health. It prioritizes strengthening international cooperation to dismantle trafficking networks and supports alternative development initiatives that encourage farmers to adopt sustainable crops over illegal ones.

In addition, the UNODC promotes education, prevention, and rehabilitation programs that frame drug misuse as a public health concern rather than solely a criminal offense. It works closely with the WHO and UNFPA to ensure that individuals affected by drug-related violence, particularly women, can access sexual and reproductive health services.

Overall, the committee advocates for integrated strategies that merge drug control efforts with gender equity and sustainable development, in alignment with the 2030 Agenda and the 2016 UNGASS Outcome Document.

Key Highlights:

- Enhance international collaboration and intelligence exchange.
- Support alternative livelihoods for agricultural communities.
- Address drug misuse through health-centered prevention and rehabilitation.
- Safeguard women's rights and access to reproductive healthcare.
- Align initiatives with SDGs 3 (Good Health), 5 (Gender Equality), and 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions).

Conclusion



The illicit trade of natural drugs presents a multifaceted global challenge that intersects with public health, human rights, and sustainable development. Over time, the transformation of substances like coca, poppy, and cannabis into potent derivatives has intensified their psychoactive effects, increased market value, and complicated enforcement efforts. Historical shifts, from traditional use to international criminalization, have shaped the current landscape, where transnational trafficking networks exploit vulnerabilities in governance and global demand.

In response, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) has adopted a comprehensive strategy that balances strict control with human centered approaches. By promoting international cooperation, supporting alternative development, and reframing drug misuse as a public health issue, the UNODC aligns its efforts with the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly those focused on health, gender equality, and justice. Its collaboration with agencies like WHO and UNFPA ensures that drug policy is not only punitive but also rehabilitative and inclusive, especially for women affected by drug-related violence.

Ultimately, the committee advocates for integrated, rights based solutions that dismantle trafficking networks while empowering communities. This holistic approach reflects a shift from reactive enforcement to proactive resilience, positioning drug control within a broader framework of global equity and sustainable progress.



Countries Position

Mexico: serves as both a producer and transit country for heroin, methamphetamine, and cocaine. Powerful cartels control smuggling routes into the U.S. and play a major role in the fentanyl crisis, amid widespread violence and weak enforcement.

United States: one of the largest consumers of illicit drugs, driving global demand. It leads international enforcement through agencies like the DEA and shapes global drug policy, while facing domestic challenges like the opioid epidemic.

Myanmar: the second largest opium producer, part of Southeast Asia's Golden Triangle. Limited state control and ongoing conflict allow heroin and synthetic drug production to thrive, affecting regional and global markets

Afghanistan: is the world's top producer of illicit opium, supplying most of the global heroin market. Political instability and poverty sustain poppy cultivation, while trafficking routes through neighboring countries make it a central player in international drug flows.

Colombia: leads global coca cultivation, fueling the cocaine trade. Despite eradication efforts like Plan Colombia, high demand and rural conflict keep production active, with cocaine trafficked to North America, Europe, and beyond.

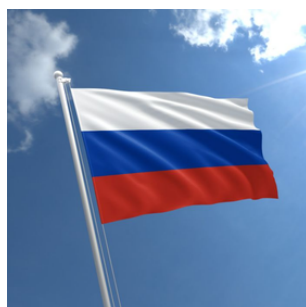
Participation List



Germany



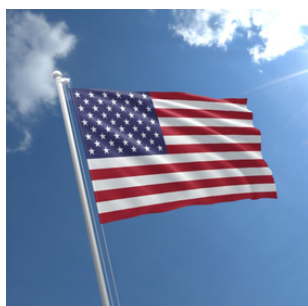
France



Russia



United Kingdom



USA



Canada



Poland



Hungary



China



Colombia



Austria



Mexico

Participation List



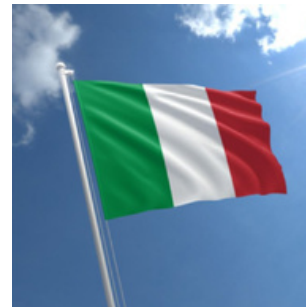
Spain



Sweden



Netherlands



Italy



Norway



Japan



Turkey



Greece



Afghanistan



Myanmar

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