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Official Statement
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Statement

INCB Thematic Hearing on the Use of Cannabis for Medical and Non-Medical Purposes

Dear Chair, your excellences delegates, ladies and gentlemen,

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to address you today in this very special meeting. In IOGT International, we really welcome the INCB's initiative and efforts to conduct this civil society consultation. It is an honor and privilege to present to you our work and positioning on this very important topic.

My name is Esbjörn Hörnberg and I am the Executive Director of IOGT International. We are the premier global network comprehensively addressing alcohol and other drugs as obstacles to sustainable development; with more than 150 Member Organizations from 60 countries we are tackling all aspects of harm caused by alcohol and other drugs in order to promote Human Rights and democracy, health and well-being for all and to help build communities where every person is enabled to live up to their fullest potential.

The theme for the deliberations today, "Use of Cannabis for Medical and Non-Medical Purposes", is very timely indeed. In this context, I believe a few very recent headlines can be enlightening for our deliberations today.

May 1st: "Australian alcohol advertising code in need of 'thorough review' for failing to protect teens".

April 30th: "The alcohol industry says moderate drinking is good for you. But most people don't drink moderately".

And one more headline, with positive news but a serious backstory is from May 1st: "Scotland 'leading the world' as minimum alcohol price introduced".

What's the story these headlines are telling? And why do they have meaning for and a bearing on today's deliberations?

The alcohol industry is one of the most profitable industries on this planet, with profit margins that investors, shareholders and top executives dream of. At the same time, 3.3 million people die every year, globally, due to an alcohol-related cause.

And yet, as one headline showed, the alcohol industry aggressively works to perpetuate the myth that alcohol use is healthy, despite vast and increasing scientific evidence.

The Australian example shows that the level of alcohol regulation is all too often not enough to even protect the most vulnerable, our children and youth.

At the same time, societies are also not able to even provide proper screening and brief interventions and offer treatment to all who suffer from alcohol problems.

And when governments, like the Scottish government, try to step up action to address these challenges, the global alcohol industry fights tooth and nail to obstruct, delay, derail and block public health legislation.

With the scientific evidence and the real-life experiences I come before you today to outline our position, with the following three points:

1. Legalization is not the way

According to United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) “a vocal pro-drug lobby argues that the damage done by drug control is greater than the harm caused by drugs” and suggests legalization of drugs, with argument to:

- a. Have better control over the consumption of drugs
- b. Raise the tax revenue from drugs
- c. Eliminate drug crime and black markets
- d. Decrease social and health harm related to drug use

However, legalization is not the silver bullet to solving the world drug problem.

Narcotic drugs are illegal for good reason and they should remain illegal.

For example, alcohol is not legal because it is safe; it is legal because most of Western civilization has used the drug for thousands of years. By contrast, the vast majority of people has not used and does not use marijuana and other drugs. Drug laws keep rates of use down, thereby lowering the negative consequences for communities. Alcohol and tobacco – two legally available drugs – are used far more frequently than illegal drugs and cause far greater damage, death and costs to society.

Concerning the use of cannabis for medical purposes, IOGT International is supportive of more research into the possible benefits of cannabinoids. Cannabis, cannabis-based products, and cannabis delivery devices should be subject to the same standards that are applicable to other prescription medications and medical devices. These products should not be distributed or otherwise provided to patients unless and until such products or devices have received approval from the regulator. IOGT

International rejects smoking as a means of drug delivery since it is not safe and does not ensure a reliable dosage.

And while parts of the marijuana plant have medical value, the Institute of Medicine in the United States concluded in 2017 that there was insufficient evidence for marijuana as a medicine. There was evidence for derivatives of marijuana to be used for nausea, multiple sclerosis, and chronic pain, but the IOM did not recommend smoking marijuana for these conditions.

And finally, I think it is important to highlight the fact that United States jurisdiction that have introduced cannabis for medical use have effectively legalized cannabis, at least among those individuals who are able and willing to purchase a recommendation.

2. Avoid the new Big Alcohol and Big Tobacco

Commercializing cannabis will create the next “Big Tobacco” and “Big Alcohol” industries – with all the ruthless, and profit-driven unethical business practices that the world is already suffering from concerning alcohol and tobacco. I mentioned a few examples earlier.

Like Big Tobacco, Big Marijuana knows that it needs lifelong addicted customers to prosper. Addictive industries generate the lion's share of their profits from people who are addicted to their products, not casual users.

This means that creating addicts is the central goal. Part of the tactics is to target the young and vulnerable like Big Tobacco did decades ago with special products, tastes and advertising messages. Big Marijuana is using the same tactics as can be seen from the avalanche of potent edibles in the form of colorfully packaged cookies, candies, sodas and brownies that are being advertised on the Internet and in mainstream newspapers and magazines.

Another Big Tobacco tactic, that the alcohol industry is copying is to obstruct, derail, delay and block public health-oriented policies because those would cut into their profits. The emerging Big Marijuana is employing lobbyists and special interests intend on putting profits and special interests over public health, safety and sustainable development.

From the playbook of Big Tobacco comes the tactic to use free trade agreements to challenge and undermine public health regulations. Big Tobacco sued countries like Uruguay and Australia, much like Big Alcohol took the Scottish government to courts. An international legal cannabis industry will likewise leverage bilateral and multilateral investment treaties to challenge public health regulations across the globe.

A summary look at the tactics of Big Alcohol and Big Tobacco reveals how similarly the vested interests in commercialized cannabis are operating.

1. Promotion of "healthier" & "safer" products
2. Corporate social responsibility & public relations
3. Pervasive marketing
4. Aggressive lobbying
5. Shifting the focus & manufacture false debate
6. Attack legitimate science & intimidate scientists
7. Fund & run disinformation campaigns
8. Frame the issue in highly "creative" ways

It is not difficult to see that Big Marijuana is using many of these tactics from the playbook of Big Tobacco and Big Alcohol already. For example, public relations efforts are in full swing and disinformation campaigns have been and are part and parcel of the attempts to legalize marijuana.

But to deny the addictive potential of cannabis or negative mental health effects is to deny the overwhelming scientific evidence available today.

3. Address the world drug problem in a comprehensive way, in line with the UN Conventions

As IOGT International we want to emphasize prevention, early intervention, treatment, recovery and population-based measures to promote public health and safety. There is already a massive treatment gap where only very few people with an alcohol use disorder receive they treatment the need and deserve; the resources societies around the world are allocating to tackle harmful substances are underwhelming and far short of what is needed to turn the tide.

Therefore, we are calling for the implementation of public health oriented, population level measures and a pivot to prevention. Marijuana legalization is not the silver bullet it is advertised to be by those who have a vested interest.

But a pivot to prevention and public health oriented, population level measures are by far the best, most humane and most sustainable approaches to the world drug problem.

Mr. Chair, when our organization started more than 165 years ago, our members worked from the conviction that equal voting rights for women can be achieved, that all human beings are equal, and that a world of peace among nations is possible.

Today, we commit to the 2030 Agenda in the same spirit, because we are convinced that a world free from poverty, gender-based violence and violence against children is possible. Likewise, we stand firm in supporting goals of drug free communities. A world where every human being is empowered and enabled to live up to their fullest potential is possible.

In IOGT, we are aware that these are tall tasks. But we are undaunted because growing scientific evidence shows the potential of a comprehensive and integrated approach to the world drug problem in helping us achieve our common goals.

I thank you for your attention.