

The Use of Cannabis for Medical and Non-Medical Purposes

Dear board and secretariat of INCB, dear colleagues from the civil society,

Thank you for giving me this opportunity to speak to you today and give our input on the use of cannabis for medical and non-medical purposes. I welcome this discussion and the inclusion of civil society as a vital part of the discussion.

I represent World Federation Against Drugs, an umbrella organization consisting of over 200 member organization from all over the world. The members of WFAD are different in size, areas of work, political priorities but we all support the vision of a society free from the non-medical use of narcotic drugs.

WFAD supports and is guided by the 1961, 1971 and 1988 UN drug control conventions as well as the UNGASS outcome document from 2016. As the monitoring and supporting body of the UN international drug control treaties, INCB has an important task to assist member states to implement the conventions in the best possible way. I will do my best to raise some of the voices from our membership on this topic. The majority of WFAD members are from the global south. I will focus my remarks on the consequences of legalization and commercialization of non-medical cannabis for vulnerable populations.

WFAD regards the non-medicinal use of narcotic substances, including cannabis, as a severe public health problem that creates significant problems for individuals, families, communities, nations and the society at large. Cannabis is an addictive and impairing drug that can cause both physical and mental health problems.

The discussion on cannabis should therefore be around how we can reduce the non-medical use of cannabis.

Instead of this public health approach, we see a worrying trend to move towards legalizing cannabis for non-medical or recreational purposes. Legalizing cannabis will result in more cannabis use, an outcome not in line with the intentions of the conventions. Increased cannabis use will result in more people suffering from adverse health and mental problems from cannabis. Prevalence of cannabis use disorders will increase. This is in part because legalization invites the creation of a commercial for-profit industry – Big Marijuana – that is incentivized to cultivate life-long cannabis users. I have no doubt that Big Marijuana like that of Big Tobacco will find efficient distribution channels and marketing strategies to reach users of all ages of their addictive products.

Efficient distribution will increase availability of the drug, its social acceptability, and as a result, increase its use.

Although frequent cannabis users are in minority, they consume the majority of the cannabis used. The growing cannabis industry is dependent on frequent users to make high profits, and as a result will target the most vulnerable populations in their marketing.

An important statement that needs to be said at every meeting, and repeated over and over again while discussing the world drug problem is that the World's poorest communities are the most vulnerable to the harms of drug use and trade.

Addiction affects all people the same. But without protective factors in place, the most vulnerable are more likely to become addicted. It is harder for these populations to get the help and support they need for treatment and paths to recovery within a society lacking resources. Worldwide, only one in six people suffering from addiction is able to get treatment. This is a deeply worrying fact that we need to deal with today -- not taking policy actions like legalization of marijuana that will increase the number of people in need of treatment.

When the rich countries of the world today are unable to adequately address the problems associated with drugs, including cannabis, how can we expect the poorer countries to do so?

Another question we need to ask us is if changing cannabis policy is where we should allocate our resources in a society that needs resources to provide school and basic health care to the population. Taxes from legal cannabis products will not be the answer to this, simply because there are no taxes to collect in poorer communities. Even in rich countries, taxes made off legal drugs (alcohol and tobacco) are obscured by their public health costs. We can already see the problems with regulating the alcohol industry in vulnerable communities. I see no reason to think that it will be easier to regulate the profit-seeking cannabis industry. Once unleashed, the marketing and advertising of cannabis will be hard to push back.

Individuals from upper and middle classes are the ones pushing for cannabis legalization, but the most vulnerable individuals and communities are the ones paying the price.

I urge you to take this into consideration when discussing non-medical use of cannabis. Legalizing and promoting the use of drugs, including cannabis, do not help the vulnerable communities. These actions harm them.

I also want to stress one more obligation we have: the need to protect children. This is one of the most important duties of society, they are our future. It is why the Convention on the Rights of the Child is one of the most widely ratified human rights treaties.

It is also why Article 33 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child requires states to take all appropriate measures to protect children from the illicit use of narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances and to prevent the use of children in the illicit production of such substances.

Protecting children from illicit drug use is hence not an option for states; it is an obligation.

The recommendation of WFAD is therefore to use the knowledge and science we have today with a clear aim to reduce the use of cannabis for non-medical use. We must not accept and promote more non-medical use of this drug.

To be able to do that we need to focus on prevention. We know what works. UNODC and WHO released an updated version of the international standards on prevention during the CND in March. It is possible, but we need action and determination to do it. We therefore urge the international community to mobilize communities to prevent the non-medical use of cannabis. We also urge INCB to continue to monitor and support member states' compliance to the international drug conventions. The conventions are the cornerstone of the international drug policy. And they should be implemented with full respect for the human rights.

I therefore urge you to put health first, for the whole world and not just for the ones with enough protective factors around them to be able to cope with increased availability of cannabis. We, as adults and part of the rich world need and have an obligation to protect the children and the other vulnerable populations.

Finally, I would like to remind you that alcohol and tobacco cause more suffering, costs and death, simply because they are more available. It is both greedy and without innovation to put profit first and to add another substance to this list of legal drugs.

Thank you.