

**STATEMENT BY MAURO DÍAZ, REPRESENTATIVE OF NGO ACCIÓN TÉCNICA SOCIAL, ON THE 3rd INTERSESSIONAL MEETING OF THE 63rd SESSION OF THE COMMISSION ON NARCOTIC DRUGS VIENNA, AUSTRIA, OCTOBER 20th, 2020**

Dear representatives, delegates, and civil society organizations.

It is well known that the Colombian administrations have supported and endorsed the war on drug policies for a long time. Nevertheless, the effectiveness of these interventions has been poor, and currently Colombia has become not only a drug-producing country but also has an increasing trend of drug consumption. According to studies performed by the National Drug Observatory of Colombia (ODC), the increase in consumption is related to a broadened offer of new psychoactive substances (NPS). In response to this, innovative strategies like harm reduction programs have emerged as an alternative approach to this problem.

Drug checking is a harm reduction strategy that allows people who use drugs (PWUD) to know the composition of their samples through chemical analysis. There is evidence that drug checking has helped to reduce the number of overdoses as well as short- and long-term adverse health effects of drug use. In line with it, the NGO Acción Técnica Social (ATS) and its project Échele Cabeza, have analyzed more than 8,000 samples since 2013 causing a positive impact over 102,000 people. Most of the chemical analyses were carried out with a properly reagent testing kit during music festivals and others nightlife standings events.

As the testing kit is not able to identify neither every single component nor its concentration, Échele Cabeza has been working with OCD to improve the detection of NPS in order to enhance the Early Warning System of Colombia. During the 2019, the laboratory tests detected NPS like cathinones, phenethylamines, and ketamine in samples of MDMA crystals, ecstasy, LSD, and an emerging drug cocktail called “Tusi”.

Drug alteration is constantly changing. Adulterants like synthetic cathinones in crystals of MDMA and ecstasy samples represent a real danger. Cathinones are psychostimulants with abuse potential and have a vast number of negative effects on different organ systems. The appearance of new synthetic cathinones in the market is growing due to the possibility of obtaining several of those compounds through drug designing. Furthermore, drug to drug interactions and incremental toxicity of these combinations is not well established yet.

Polydrug use is an extensive habit among PWUD. Polydrug is usually performed with the objective of counteracting some undesired effects of any substance for improving the psychoactive experience. This polydrug consumption is normally done sequentially or taken at the same time. However, people can ingest or snort two or more substances without knowing it due to the common practice of including adulterants during the drug manufacturing by illegal drug makers. The laboratory tests have detected caffeine, MDMA, and ketamine presence in “Tusi” samples, and this deserves attention because the specific interactions have not been studied in detail yet. Moreover, other substances can be added to the “Tusi” preparation making it more dangerous.

It is important to highlight that only drug checking with modern instrumental analysis like portable spectrometer, chromatographic analysis, and other techniques are needed to detect the real composition of those complex samples as mentioned above. For this reason, the NGO Acción Técnica Social would like to invite civil society organizations, private entities, and governments to strengthen our drug checking services for generating timely early warning alerts. Colombia and Latin America have a threat related to new adulterants and new mixtures of substances that could be a health problem that cannot be solved with more extensive lists and other traditional measurements taken this far.

While drug prohibition has not been able to eliminate either production or consumption, it is time to take care of user's needs with new tailored strategies and policies based on evidence, until legal regulation exists to allow for safe access.

Thanks for your attention.