

**Karim Khan Afridi Welfare Foundation KKAWF, Pakistan**

**Statement by Cristina von Sperling Afridi, Chairperson**

**International Narcotics Control Board-INCB Civil Society Hearing May 25, 2022**

*Analysis of the trend to legalise the non-medical use of drugs with an emphasis on cannabis*

The Chair

Distinguished delegates, ladies and gentlemen

It is my great pleasure to be part of this important forum - the INCB civil society hearing on the “analysis of the trend to legalise the non-medical use of drugs, in particular cannabis and related products”. I have the honour to speak on behalf of the Karim Khan Afridi Welfare Foundation-Pakistan.

*KKAWF*, a civil society outfit dedicated to highlighting the role of prevention as a tool against drug abuse, is very concerned on the gradual liberalisation of use of cannabis and cannabis related substances. *KKAWF* draws attention to this concern since the drug problem is being acknowledged as the biggest public health challenge, exacerbated with the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. In this context liberalisation of cannabis use heightens risks of drug use and drug use disorders.

It is of much concern as Pakistan sits on one of the world’s busiest drug trafficking corridors, with an estimated over 8.9 million users and close to 5 million addicts (in 2015) – as well as it is home to 130 million under age of 30.

For Pakistan, it is an alarming situation as cannabis is the most commonly used drug in the country, and the legalization of this substance, we feel, is further putting at risk the youth population. Same is true in many countries around the world.

Given that there are already 275 million people using psychoactive drugs worldwide and 36 million are with drug use disorders (WDR 2021), our apprehension on legally allowing the use of cannabis is growing. This fear is supported by recent findings of civil society reviews in Pakistan and other countries, which have shown concerning findings of trends on the rise of cannabis use is worrying also as the potency of the drug has quadrupled over the past two decades.

KKAWF is of the view that such liberalisation policies without scientifically supported evidence and adequate monitoring is increasing the use of cannabis and other drugs. Further, there are no findings that shows reduction in the safe use of cannabis, which has severe health implications amongst other negatives. Moreover, most countries have reported a rise in the use of cannabis during the pandemic.

These trends confirm our fears that policies that are adopted without due research on non-medical use of drugs especially cannabis, are premature, ambitious and do not represent responsible practice. It is imperative that relaxed government policies are not giving out the flawed message that the drug is harmless.

Current liberal policies on cannabis use have encouraged a diminished awareness of the risks associated with cannabis abuse which would in due time lead inevitably to an increase in drug abuse among young people and entail serious social consequences. Lower perception of drug use risks has been linked to higher rates of drug use, and the findings of UNODC's 2021 World Drug Report also highlight the need to close the gap between perception and reality to educate young people and safeguard public health.

Without adequate control and monitoring it is projected that the world may see more car accidents, more emergency room visits, acute psychological distress, cognitive impairment amongst other health impacts. This will further burden the economy and the response of public health institutions.

Pakistan, in September 2020 took the fast track and approved the industrial and medicinal use of hemp, with the intent to tap into the multi-million dollar industry. Implementing this policy with viable controls will remain challenging and it can send flawed impressions.

It is clear, it seems that the world has no capacity to win the war against the drug mafia and its profitable destructive business. KKAWF insists in recommending that the main focus on addressing the drug problem should be on prevention programs by civil society and most important, major involvement of the governments in these prevention campaigns. It is imperative to continue creating a mechanism of self-defense in the youth. Prevention education programs are extremely important to empowering youth. Legalizing the non-medical use of drugs, it is to reiterate the perception that addiction is a human weakness and therefore should be acceptable, which should not.

In light of these trends and nuances, it is crucial that policies for non-medical use of drugs including cannabis need to be based on both ethical and evidenced based findings.

We need to take notice of the trends towards the unsafe use and increasing use of cannabis, by not encouraging legalisation of cannabis and adopting evidence based policies which don't send out flawed messages on safe use of cannabis and other non-medical use of drugs.

Thank You

***About Cristina von Sperling Afridi:** She is the Chairperson of Karim Khan Afridi Welfare Foundation which has been working with dedication in Pakistan since 2015 to disseminate knowledge and awareness on the adverse effects of drug use and help break the taboos that exist around drug use. It empowers youth and helps them to identify, understand and manage emotions, and stay away from drugs and other risky health behaviours through its pillars of sports, environment, arts/culture and developing civic sense. KKAWF has an active global presence and has made recommendations at multiple UN, Istanbul Initiative, and other international forums for engaging youth in healthy behaviours for a better future for all.*