

Dear INCB President, distinguished delegates, and colleagues,

As Turkish Green Crescent Society (TGCS), our priority area of work is to struggle against different kinds of addictions that devastate the physical and mental health of societies with a particular focus on vulnerable populations; namely tobacco, alcohol, and drugs. We conduct prevention, treatment and rehabilitation and advocacy work in our struggle against addictions and our core principles are to be based solely on evidence and science and to have a global vision.

By far, cannabis remains the most used substance around the globe. As such, according to the UNODC World Drug Report 2021, an estimated 200 million people used cannabis in 2019; representing 4% of the global population. The report also points out that from 1995 to 2019, cannabis has become 4 times more potent but that as much as 40% fewer young people perceive it as harmful. Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic inevitably caused an increase in the trends of cannabis use.

On the subject of the supply side of the issue, when we take a glance at some regional data to diversify the sources, we see that more forms of cannabis are appearing and new ways of consuming cannabis are also emerging. The trend of cannabis products being adulterated with highly potent synthetic cannabinoids is particularly concerning, too.

Besides, based on a Turkey-wide national survey conducted with the principle of voluntariness, around 80% of the people with drug use initiated their drug use with cannabis. Furthermore, every 3 people out of 5 who started using drugs with cannabis later started using other kinds of drugs. This data strengthens the argument that, behaviorally and developmentally many of the shared root causes that increase an individual's likelihood of using cannabis also increase the same individual's likelihood of using other drugs such as opioids.

We strongly believe that the need to increase efforts for prevention of the non-medical uses of drugs and especially that of cannabis is quite evident. However, we would also like to talk about the convergence between addictive harmful industries with the EVALI Disease example. Even though at the first glance it may have been seen like the disease was not related to cannabis, further details show that the psychoactive component of cannabis, THC as well as Vitamin E acetate was added to the vaping mechanism. This example is relevant to the case of US states' decriminalization and legalization. Such that, the last time I checked a total of 18 states have legalized the recreational use of cannabis. Recreational use of cannabis is also legal in 6 countries in the world. Additionally, we would like to reiterate that even products that claim to be purely made out of CBD may contain small amounts of THC.

On a last note, e-cigarette and vaping products are the most commonly used among youth. Therefore, in such an epidemiological landscape, we need to talk about the importance of prevention and in particular of early prevention from a multidimensional point of view.

Prevention, as also indicated in the UNODC/WHO International Standards on Drug Use Prevention's second updated edition, is cost-effective which is important to bear in mind in policy-making. We know that for every dollar spent on prevention, at least 10 can be saved in future health, social and crime costs. Furthermore, as we are aware that children and adolescents whose brains are still developing are particularly vulnerable to substance use, it is essential to implement early prevention strategies when it comes to cannabis, too.

To summarize our main points, we would like to talk about the policy implications and our suggested way forward: Nowadays, cannabis has become the epicenter of drug policy debates globally; and many of these debates are multifactorial as they are also related to the criminal justice systems of countries.

Furthermore, it is important to note that the "human rights" and "personal freedom" discourses at best underestimate the influence of multinational companies. These industries, and in particular the global alcohol and tobacco industries effectively use these discourses to maximize their profit through a diversified portfolio of products that seem appealing to the youth. The cannabis liberalization movement equally have caused a creation of a cannabis industry targeting youth. This results in the undermining of all of the efforts of the international public health community.

When it comes to prevention, it is important to acknowledge the necessity to employ a public health approach to the issue, away from stigma and based on strengthening protective factors while diminishing risk factors among youth. Sports for example is an excellent tool for that as it teaches many relevant life skills to youth that they may use when in transition to adulthood. It also facilitates youth's meaningful social interactions.

In terms of policies on cannabis use, we would like to reiterate the vital importance of policies to be informed by evidence. Therefore, it is important that more reliable data on cannabis use and their effects on vulnerable populations in countries that legalized or decriminalized its recreational use is obtained. These effects may be related to driving under the influence of cannabis which is known to increase 1 to 3 times the likelihood of being in a car or child neglect. These all constitute important topics in themselves to research and discuss further. Therefore, we are eagerly waiting for international organizations like INCB to further enhance these civil society dialogues.

Thank you!