

**Intersessional panel discussion  
Human Rights Council  
5 February 2024**

**Statement by Mr Jean-Luc Lemahieu  
Director of the Division for Policy Analysis and Public Affairs of the United  
Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC)**

Good morning, distinguished delegates,

[welcome/thank you]

Respecting, protecting and promoting all human rights, fundamental freedoms and the inherent dignity of all individuals and the rule of law is crucial in the development and implementation of drug policies at all levels.

The body of international law establishes human rights that are universal and inalienable. The international community has continuously stressed that to effectively address and counter the world drug problem, any policy or action must respect and preserve those rights, and must be in line with the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations, as well as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

UNODC implements its mandate to support Member States to prevent and address not only the non-medical use of drugs, crime and corruption, but also to promote health, justice and peace for all.

Human rights is one of the three embedded cross-cutting themes of the new UNODC strategy (together with gender and women empowerment, youth and disability inclusion), spanning from normative, policy work, research, and technical assistance delivery.

UNODC was proud to join all stakeholders at the high-level event in Geneva to commemorate the 75th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and we announced at that occasion human rights pledges that cover the entire spectrum of our work.

Let me turn to some specific issues related to the world drug problem.

Protecting the health and welfare of individuals and society is the fundamental aim of the three international drug conventions. Being a source of international public law, the conventions represent a commitment of State Parties to

implement obligations arising from them – mindful of obligations stemming from other legal instruments, including human rights law.

The report of the Office of the High Commissioner addresses several important human right-related challenges faced in many parts of the world.

The world drug problem is complex and multifaceted and constantly developing. We are all aware of the proliferation of synthetic drugs and the major threat to health they present. At the same time, research indicates that while drug potency has gone up, risk perception has decreased. Additionally, the internet, and the growing vulnerability of the South contribute to the challenges in developing most effective responses.

One additional aspect of crucial importance I would like to highlight today is the right of the child to be protected from drug use and associated disorders, grounded in the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

25% of the world population are children – people below the age of 18. The children population is particularly vulnerable to the negative health and social consequences of substance and drug use. Evidence has shown that the earlier children start to use substances, the more likely they will be to develop mental health disorders, including substance use disorders.

However, too often, our narrative has left children behind.

At the end of last year, UNODC has launched a new initiative – CHAMPS – Child Amplified Prevention Services and we have pledged to promote the right to health of 10 million children vulnerable to starting to use drugs by amplifying their resilience in 10 countries in the next 5 years.

We also hope that early prevention of drug use, in particular among children and young people, and other vulnerable populations, would also be part of future human-rights discussions related to the world drug problem, including by the relevant treaty bodies in Geneva. UNODC stands ready to provide expertise and scientific evidence in this area.

Young people are the voice of today and tomorrow. They are essential to accomplish our mandates, enhance the rule of law, improve human security, and pursue justice, integrity, and health priorities. Youth can uphold human rights for future generations and instil in them a sense of their significance and worth.

The second aspect I would like to highlight today is the right of the individual to health, engrained in the Universal Declaration on Human Rights. Ensuring

access to essential medicines to improve our quality of life and living without avoidable and treatable pain, are but a few illustrations of this right.

International law protects the health and welfare of every person and established – with the adoption of the Convention on Narcotic Drugs and the Convention on Psychotropic Substances - a timeless and science-based foundation for the realization of that right.

The scheduling system has been designed to be responsive to the evolution of scientific knowledge on drugs, their liability for abuse, their dependence potential, and their value in therapeutics.

The report of the Office of the High Commissioner recommends for States to consider developing a regulatory system for legal access to all controlled substances. Obviously, what is meant is establishing national systems to ensure availability of and access to controlled substances for medical and scientific purposes. This is incidentally not a consideration, but rather an obligation of all State Parties to the conventions.

Let me go beyond and touch briefly upon thematic areas that very much cut across with the world drug problem.

Our prison reform work contributes to the prevention of torture and inhuman or degrading treatment and to the protection of other rights of persons deprived of their liberty.

Our legislative and policy advice, training and capacity-building promotes alternative measures to conviction and punishment, and delivers programmes focused on rehabilitation and reintegration of offenders and young people in conflict with the law.

Given the complex, multifaceted nature of the world drug problem, understanding and working in all these areas is of great importance.

I would like to conclude by reiterating the utmost importance of basing our work on science and reliable data. This ensures that decisions we make as a UN entity are grounded in evidence and in line with agreed upon legal commitments for which we as the UN are accountable for.

As I have mentioned before, UNODC stands ready to share its expertise on any and all of these areas.

Thank you.

