



**Economic and Social
Council**

Distr.
GENERAL

E/CN.7/1996/12
2 April 1996

ORIGINAL: ENGLISH

COMMISSION ON NARCOTIC DRUGS
Thirty-ninth session
Vienna, 16-25 April 1996
Item 7 of the provisional agenda*

**STIMULANTS AND THE USE OF THEIR PRECURSORS IN THE ILLICIT
MANUFACTURE OF AND TRAFFICKING IN DRUGS**

Report of the Secretariat

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INTRODUCTION

1. The present report outlines the actions undertaken thus far by the United Nations International Drug Control Programme (UNDCP) pursuant to Economic and Social Council resolution 1995/20, paragraphs 11 and 12, as well as future activities and the final objective to be achieved. Section I deals with the first-phase implementation of the resolution. Section II covers the approaches adopted in the study undertaken by UNDCP and the expert meeting at

*E/CN.7/1996/1.

which it was considered. Section III contains an overview of the principal findings of the study and the expert meeting.

I. IMPLEMENTATION OF ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COUNCIL RESOLUTION 1995/20

2. The Economic and Social Council, in its resolution 1995/20, requested the Secretary-General, with the assistance of the Executive Director of UNDCP and in consultation with the International Narcotics Control Board, to convene, drawing upon voluntary contributions from Governments, expert meetings in 1995 and 1996 of regulatory and law enforcement authorities of interested Governments, in order to discuss counter-measures against illicit manufacture of and trafficking in psychotropic substances, particularly stimulants, and the illicit use of their precursors. It also requested the Secretary-General, with the assistance of the Executive Director of UNDCP and in consultation with the Board, to undertake, within existing resources, a thorough study on stimulants and the use of their precursors in the illicit manufacture of and trafficking in drugs and to prepare a report thereon for submission to the Commission, taking into account any comments that might be made on the study at the expert meetings.

3. Thus, the Executive Director was requested, in consultation with the Board: (a) to undertake a comprehensive, global study on the manufacture of, trafficking in and abuse of amphetamine-type stimulants and the manufacture of and trafficking in their precursors; (b) to convene expert meetings on different dimensions of the subject; and (c) to prepare a final report to the Commission at its fortieth session, synthesizing the results of the study and the expert meetings.

4. The main objective of the above-cited activities is to improve the knowledge base on licit and illicit manufacture of amphetamine-type stimulants, trafficking in and diversion from licit sources of the stimulants and their precursors (including trafficking routes and methods of diversion), and the extent of abuse of amphetamine-type stimulants. That will lay the foundation for reviewing national and international control approaches to solving problems associated with such substances and for designing appropriate policies and countermeasures to reduce the illicit supply of and demand for such substances, for complementary national and international application.

5. To achieve that objective, two expert meetings were planned and a global study was prepared by UNDCP, in consultation with the Board. The study, entitled "Amphetamine-type stimulants: a global review", will be made available to the Commission as a background document.

6. The first expert meeting was conceived as a technical fact-finding exercise, aimed at defining the problem in terms of its magnitude, characteristics, trends and social and economic implications and at comparing the problem with problems involving opiates and cocaine. The second expert meeting is to be a policy-oriented undertaking, reviewing national and international regulatory regimes pertaining to amphetamine-type stimulants and their precursors and leading to the recommendation of appropriate policies and countermeasures.

7. UNDCP received special voluntary contributions from the Governments of Japan and Switzerland that enabled it to convene the first expert meeting at Vienna from 12 to 16 February 1996, during which the global review was presented. The participants in the first expert meeting were scientists and representatives of national regulatory and enforcement authorities, a total of 52 experts from 26 countries and four organizations. A summary of the principal findings of the global review and the main conclusions of the first expert meeting will be made available to the Commission in a conference room paper (E/CN.7/1996/CRP.3). The expert meeting endorsed the global review and agreed that its findings should be incorporated in a revised version, which would subsequently be published.

8. The second expert meeting is expected to take place later in 1996, probably in November. In addition to regulatory and law enforcement experts, the participants in that meeting will include representatives of relevant national and international policy-making bodies. The meeting will recommend, on the basis of the global review, appropriate policies and countermeasures and will report thereon to the Commission at its fortieth session.

II. APPROACHES ADOPTED

9. The approach adopted by the first expert meeting was determined by the complex scientific nature of the subject-matter to be covered. The only document before the meeting was the study prepared by UNDCP entitled "Amphetamine-type stimulants: a global review". In accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1995/20, the study covers a wide area, ranging from the licit to the illicit and from the bio-medical field to the economic, social, political and epidemiological fields. In view of the number of subjects to be covered and the complex nature of many of them, the meeting decided that the most efficient way to conduct its proceedings would be to accept, supplement, complement or correct the global review where appropriate. The agenda of the meeting facilitated such an approach, since it was set out in conformity with the structure of the global review: detailed investigation of licit manufacture of, trade in and consumption of amphetamine-type stimulants; illicit manufacture of and trafficking in the stimulants and their precursors; trends and patterns of abuse; and some aspects of the present control regime for dealing with the problem.

10. The first expert meeting confirmed the principal findings of the global review. Individual experts provided additional information that complemented what was already available in the global review, particularly in technical areas and in terms of national and regional experiences in assessing the nature of the problem. The meeting decided that a satisfactory outcome of its deliberations would be the publication of the global review, duly revised to take into account the additional information provided. The most important of these findings are set out in section II I below.

III. PRINCIPAL FINDINGS

11. One of the principal findings of the global review, confirmed by the expert meeting, is that the control system works well on the licit side of the equation. On the illicit side, by contrast, the control system is far more limited, since illicit production of and trafficking in amphetamine-type stimulants have increased over the last two decades, their growth rates even surpassing the corresponding rates for cocaine and heroin in the 1990s. This general trend is an aggregation of trends for individual substances within the group and for different parts of the world. The traditional amphetamine-type stimulants, methamphetamine and amphetamine, are still the two most widely abused substances in the group. Methamphetamine is concentrated in North America and in east Asia and amphetamine is concentrated in Europe and Oceania. Of the other substances, the "ecstasy" group constitutes the most dynamic "growth area" in many countries, especially in Europe. Though smaller in magnitude, methcathinone production and abuse seem to be growing rapidly, primarily in the United States of America. What began originally as a displacement from the licit to the illicit sector in a small number of key countries in east Asia, Europe and North America now shows every sign of diffusing beyond those original focal areas into neighbouring ones. This intercontinental nexus has considerable potential for developing hitherto small subregional markets into an integrated global market, a process that has already begun.

12. The amphetamine-type stimulants provide the best historical evidence of what is often called the "ballooning effect". In the case of the plant-based narcotic drugs, the cultivation, extraction or purification/conversion moves from one geographical location to another to escape law enforcement. With synthetic drugs, the nature of the "ballooning" is different: tightening supply in a market with conditions of constant demand merely leads to a shifting from licit to illicit manufacture, initially within the same country and then perhaps into a neighbouring one.

13. The problem of the amphetamine-type stimulants is driven by both supply and demand. The unique characteristics of supply can best be understood in terms of the chemical and pharmacological nature of the whole group of substances:

(a) The amphetamine-type end-products have a simple chemical structure that makes them ideal for clandestine experimentation;

(b) Many simple chemicals can serve in the various synthesis processes and are cheap and freely available in most countries;

- (c) A great number of simple synthesis methods and pathways have been developed, patented and/or published in the scientific literature, usually consisting of few steps leading from a precursor to the desired end-product;
- (d) This information and its availability have been increasing since the first quarter of the twentieth century;
- (e) Increased technological awareness has made common knowledge of simple chemical conversion processes that can today be performed by any amateur;
- (f) Since the amphetamine-type stimulants are similar in chemical structure, they are ideal for making minor structural modifications that lead to a different end-product;
- (g) Such modifications may be determined by the availability of the precursors or may be the result of a deliberate effort to circumvent legislation by manufacturing an amphetamine-type stimulant not covered by national law or international convention ("designer drugs", "designer amphetamines" or, more accurately, controlled drug analogues);
- (h) From the perspective of the drug abuser, the "substitutive" nature of the whole group of substances should be noted: in spite of individual differences, they all provide pharmacological assistance in achieving similar ends or effects.

14. In terms of demand, the following characteristics appear to be typical of, and specific to, the amphetamine-type stimulants:

- (a) They are now consumed in practically every region of the world and, by virtue of this fact, can be called a global problem;
- (b) They carry a "modern" image in comparison with the traditional stimulants used in some countries, such as cola nuts or betel nuts, and can easily, on the crest of a wave of modernization, replace the latter;
- (c) Their occupational use can quite easily spill over into recreational use because the distinction between the one and the other can never be absolute;
- (d) They carry a "home-made" image in terms of quality, being made either within the country of consumption or in a "kitchen laboratory" closely linked to the abuser;
- (e) They have a relatively benign image compared with cocaine, the other stimulant available on illicit markets;
- (f) They are often cheaper than cocaine and usually have a longer-lasting effect;
- (g) They offer versatile routes of application, because they can be ingested orally, sniffed, inhaled or injected;
- (h) They are particularly attractive to young people, especially in the "ecstasy" form, because they are perceived as enhancing performance and communication and have come to embody a fashionable lifestyle, as evidenced by the recent explosion of information about them;
- (i) The public health risk that they carry (not only because of their addictive potential, but also because of the implications of the intravenous route of application) is frequently under-estimated in the public perception, as well as in the judicial and enforcement areas;
- (j) The recent trend towards decriminalizing the possession of small quantities of narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances for personal use may favour the "kitchen technology", which is typical of the clandestine manufacture of the amphetamine-type stimulants.

15. The implications for drug control are to be considered by the second expert meeting, on the basis of the findings of the global review and the first expert meeting. What seems to be required at the moment, therefore, is to emphasize the most salient points that have emerged from the review:

- (a) The problem is now a global one. Yet only a handful of countries, because of their historical experience, are equipped to deal with it. Such responses become less effective as manufacture, trafficking and abuse spill over into other countries and an integrated global market starts to develop;
- (b) In the countries that are being drawn into the global market, the principal limitation is a continuing emphasis on the traditional plant-based narcotic drugs. While this is perfectly valid, especially in view of the need to balance priorities with limited resources, it still creates a dilemma that leads to the synthetic drugs being given insufficient attention;

(c) The lack of attention is both a cause and a consequence of the limited knowledge and awareness of the synthetic drug problem among many drug control agencies, where there is limited technical capacity to perceive the problem, let alone resolve it. This is in marked contrast with the increasingly sophisticated technical capacity of clandestine entrepreneurs;

(d) Technical problems stretch over into the legislative area. There is an enormous variability in national legislation, particularly as it pertains to the amphetamine-type stimulants. More common ground has to be found, in terms of both national compliance with existing regulations and the cooperation of industry, if the international drug control treaties are to be more effective against the synthetic drug problem;

(e) The United Nations Convention against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances of 1988¹ is an adequate basis for controlling precursors; and the Convention on Psychotropic Substances of 1971² is an adequate basis for controlling the end-products. Yet the review has identified a number of significant limitations, all pointing to the fact that the focus of control, for both precursors and end-products, has to be different for the synthetic drugs: unlike the narcotic drugs, there are no clearly identifiable botanical supplies, but a huge variety of precursors; similarly, there are not only a few easily identifiable end-products, but also an enormous variety of potentially substitutable substances;

(f) Scheduling criteria, such as those used in the Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs of 1961,³ might offer a way out of the limitations of the lengthy and onerous scheduling process required by the 1971 Convention, particularly in view of the fact that the problem of amphetamine-type stimulants has shifted almost entirely to the illicit area. This is by no means a clear solution, however, because of the technical dilemma already noted. It will require considerable technical expertise (chemical, forensic, pharmacological and legal), as well as financial resources, at the country level. These cannot be guaranteed in the present circumstances.

16. It is quite apparent, therefore, that traditional drug control approaches to this enormously flexible clandestine industry offer limited chances of success. Such approaches may even have contributed, quite inadvertently, to the shifts from the licit to the illicit areas of manufacture, as well as to the capacity of illicit markets to stay one step ahead of controls. It appears that synthetic drugs, particularly the amphetamine-type stimulants, will be a problem of the twenty-first century. The evidence in the study, particularly the evidence on considerations of availability, price, risk and consumer preference, seems to show that synthetic drugs have the potential to become a global problem of a magnitude greater than that posed by the plant-based narcotic drugs.

Notes

¹*Official Records of the United Nations Conference for the Adoption of a Convention against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances, Vienna, 25 November-20 December 1988*, vol. I (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.94.XI.5).

²United Nations, *Treaty Series*, vol. 1019, No. 14956.

³*Ibid.*, vol. 520, No. 7515.