

Change Through Cooperation

WISMUN V

Chair Report

**United Nations Office on
Drugs and Crime**

**Exploring Legalization versus
Criminalization of Cannabis: Navigating
Public Health, Safety, and Social Justice
Across Different Nations**

Kyle Tse and Veer Bagga

Message from the Chairs

Dear Delegates,

Welcome to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) at WISMUN VI! We are honored to serve as your chairs in this conference. The UNODC, established in 1997, plays a pivotal role in the global fight against illicit drugs, organized crime, corruption, and terrorism. This year, we will delve into two complex topics, namely:

- 1) Addressing gang violence and drug trafficking in the Americas; and
- 2) Exploring Legalization versus Criminalization of Cannabis: Navigating Public Health, Safety, and Social Justice Across Different Nations

These issues present significant challenges as countries grapple with the balance between legalization for medical and recreational use and the associated health risks that prompt others to maintain strict prohibitions, as well as different approaches to control gang violence. Delegates are advised to consider national policies in the context of international implications, proposing solutions that ensure health, safety, and justice.

Committee procedures are as follows:

Opening Speeches – 60 seconds each, compulsory.

General Speakers' List (GSL) – 90 seconds per speech.

Technology Policy: Only permitted during unmoderated caucuses for drafting resolutions.

We encourage you to conduct thorough research beyond this chair report to deepen your understanding of the topics. If you have any questions regarding logistics, procedures, or the topics at hand, please don't hesitate to reach out. We look forward to productive discussions and insightful debates.

Best Regards,

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Glossary

Key Terms	Definition
Legalization	Removing legal prohibitions on cannabis, allowing regulated production, sale, and use
Criminalization	Maintaining legal bans with punitive measures (arrests, imprisonment) for production, sale, or possession.
Medical Cannabis	Legal use of cannabis for prescribed health conditions, often with THC/CBD regulations.
Recreational Use	Non-medical consumption of cannabis is typically restricted by age and quantity in legalized systems.
Public Health Approach	Treating drug use as a health issue (not criminal), focusing on prevention, treatment, and data.
THC (Tetrahydrocannabinol)	Psychoactive compound causing "high"; regulated in legal markets
CBD (Cannabidiol)	Non-intoxicating compound used medically (e.g., for seizures, anxiety); often legal even where THC is banned.
Cross-Border Trafficking	Illicit trade between countries with differing laws (e.g., from legalized to prohibited states).
Expungement	Clearing criminal records for past cannabis offenses to redress inequities.
Diversion	Legal cannabis leaking into illegal markets

Background Information

Cannabis legalization has widely become recognized as the most controversial policy issue of the twenty-first century, raising substantive public debates on health, criminal justice, and economic empowerment worldwide. Historically, cannabis has been viewed as a taboo subject in international drug conventions. The last few decades, however, have seen a radical shift in attitudes about the herb. Regulated legal frameworks for its application are being adopted increasingly by jurisdictions across the globe.

UNODC reports that cannabis ranks as the most widely used illicit drug in the world, with an estimated annual user account of 200 million. So prevalent are the use and the shifting scientific views of cannabis effects that they have prompted governments to reconsider hard-line prohibitive policies.

In the modern era, this latest wave of reform culminated by the late twentieth century, when scientific evidence was finally beginning to prevail in the courts regarding the therapeutic benefits of cannabis in pain relief and other medical conditions. Evidence for cannabis's medical use and concerns about the social costs of prohibition, such as mass incarceration and racial disparities in drug enforcement, became catalysts for historic policy shifts.

The beginning of the twenty-first century marked a hinge moment with the national legalization of recreational cannabis in 2012—first of its kind. This landmark step countered decades of global drug-control laws and opened a new phase of cannabis policy.

The Medical Breakthrough

Initially, medical cannabis catalyzed broader policy reform as it was portrayed as beneficial for various ailments. Its clinical trials have been especially promising concerning neuropathic pain, cutting down on nausea caused by chemotherapy, and treating refractory epilepsy. Such advancements have compelled health systems and global institutions to reconsider the classification of cannabis as a dangerous drug without any therapeutic purpose. The 2019 World Health Organization's call to reevaluate cannabis in international drug treaties underscored the growing scientific consensus and marked a watershed moment in international drug policy discourse.

The Criminal Justice Dilemma

Due to the consequences of prohibitionist policies, numerous social costs have been imposed on cannabis, contributing to a significant portion of drug arrests worldwide. Enforcement has disproportionately targeted marginalized communities, leading to long-standing socioeconomic effects. In some jurisdictions, racial minorities face arrest

rates that are four times higher than those of majority populations for similar cannabis offenses. These ongoing disparities have ignited calls for reform, prompting many legalization initiatives to incorporate social equity measures aimed at addressing past injustices.

Economic Considerations

The economic potential of a legal cannabis industry is becoming increasingly evident, resulting in billions of dollars in tax revenue and hundreds of thousands of new jobs in early adopting jurisdictions. Market analysts expect that at the end of the decade, global legal cannabis sales will likely exceed \$100 billion annually. However, this promise will not necessarily come without challenges, among the most apparent being the illegal markets that often undercut legal prices. Taxation and regulation must balance generating public revenue and competing with underground suppliers. Other issues raised as concerns from the rapid growth of this industry include corporate consolidation, which pushes small producers to the margins, highlighting the need for equitable business regulations.

Public Health Balancing Act

While legalizing substances raises complex public health policy issues, it also places additional responsibilities on health professionals regarding related concerns, such as an increase in problematic use, particularly among adolescents. Regular cannabis use among adolescents is believed to affect brain development, but the specifics of how and to what extent remain subjects of ongoing research. The current regulations have acknowledged the risks associated with potency limits, public education initiatives, and marketing restrictions. These, however, would vary by jurisdiction and thus make for exceptional case studies for new and emerging markets.

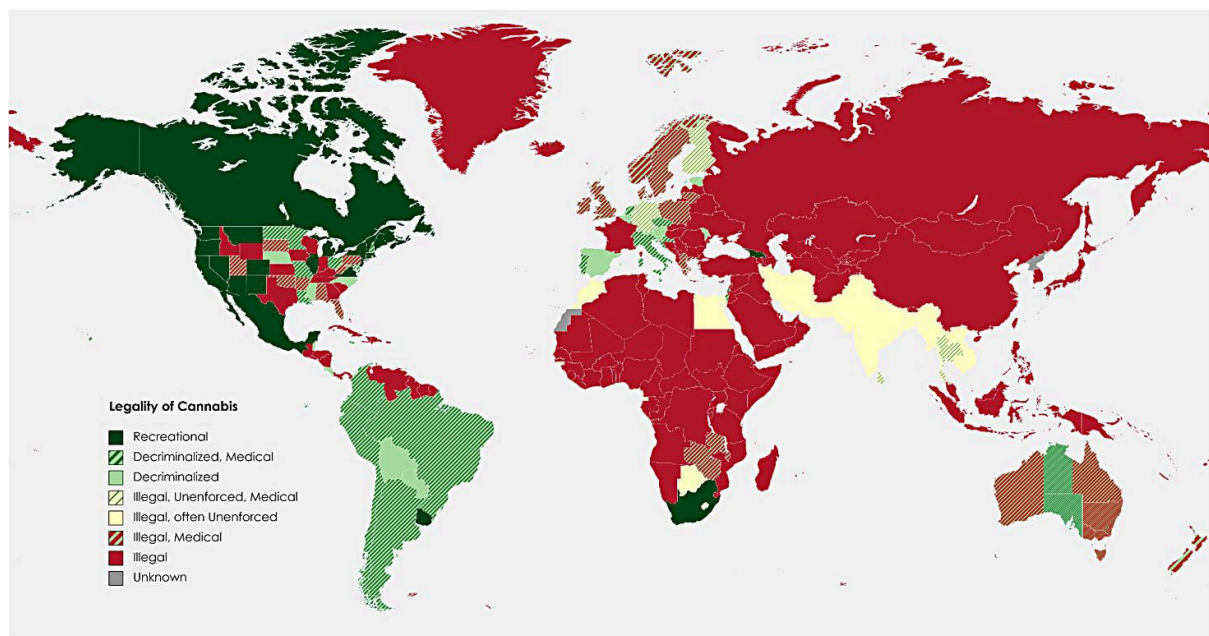
International Policy Tensions

The current state of the global drug control regime is increasingly problematic, with more and more countries deviating from the prohibitionist model. The 1961 Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs, which was the basis for an international cannabis prohibition, is now becoming increasingly difficult to reconcile with national legalization experiments. This has created tension within a complicated legal framework, where countries pursuing reform often conflict with treaty obligations, while countries maintaining strict prohibition grapple with domestic pressures for change. This has resulted in a messy patchwork of

policies that complicate international cooperation on drug control and create challenges for cross-border enforcement.

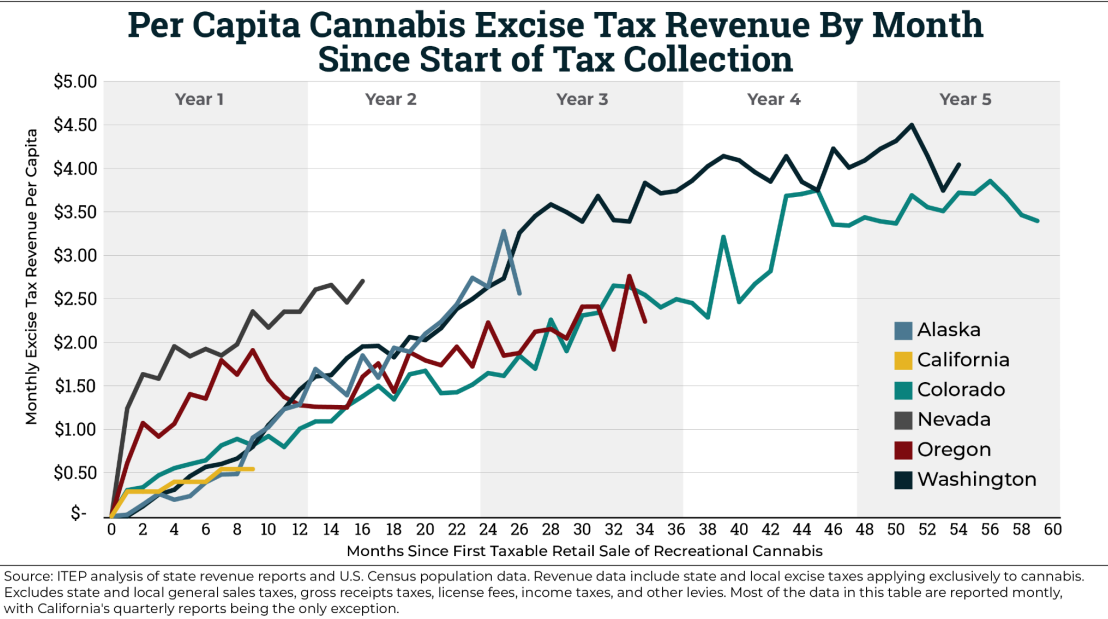
The Road Ahead

The policy framework surrounding cannabis is still evolving, but many questions are yet to be answered. A key unresolved issue is how countries balance individual liberties with public health concerns. What role should international bodies play concerning a substance illegal under treaty law yet increasingly accepted in practice? How should societies address the historical harms of prohibition while also preventing emerging forms of commercial exploitation? These complexities suggest that cannabis policy will remain dynamic and contested for years to come. Cannabis policy encompasses critical issues of justice, health, governance, and more.



The shifting global landscape of cannabis policy, with colors indicating different regulatory approaches

Figure 8



Demonstrating the economic potential of legal cannabis markets

Key Stakeholders

Key Stakeholders	Involvement in this issue
Canada	As the pioneering nation in cannabis legalization among major economies, Canada established a regulatory framework that has since served as an international model. The Canadian model combines rigorous commercial management with progressive social policies, requiring standardized packaging with health warnings while implementing restrictions, particularly for edible products. Notably, the government has prioritised restoring justice through its record removal programme, which has cleared over 45,000 historical minor cannabis convictions. Canada now actively shares its regulatory experience with other nations considering reform, particularly regarding youth prevention

	strategies and product standardization protocols.
United States Of America	The United States presents the world's most complex cannabis policy environment, with 24 states legalizing recreational use despite ongoing federal prohibition. This contradictory situation creates significant difficulties, particularly in the financial sector, where most cannabis businesses are denied access to banking services, forcing them to operate largely in cash. Section 280E of the tax code creates extra challenges by banning standard business expenses for cannabis-related businesses
Germany	Germany's landmark 2024 legalization represents a turning point for European drug policy, introducing a carefully planned system that prioritizes public health while respecting EU legal regulations. The German model permits adults to possess fair quantities (up to 25 grams) while allowing limited home cultivation of three plants, with plans to eventually distribute through pharmacies where professional guidance can be provided. This approach aims to dismantle the criminal networks that currently supply about 90% of the German cannabis market while implementing strong public education campaigns about responsible use.
South Africa	Following its historical 2018 Constitutional Court decision decriminalizing private cannabis use, South Africa has faced significant challenges in translating this ruling into effective legislation. The legislative void has allowed informal markets to flourish, particularly in traditional growing regions like the Eastern Cape, while failing to establish protections for small-scale farmers against potential corporate domination. Proposed

	regulatory frameworks emphasize creating inclusive economic opportunities to address historical inequalities, but bureaucratic delays and political reluctance have significantly slowed progress.
Drug Policy Alliance	This influential advocacy organization has played a pivotal role in shaping global cannabis debates. Their research reveals how Black Americans face 3.6 times higher arrest rates for cannabis offenses despite similar usage rates across racial groups. Through strategic action and policy advocacy, the Alliance has successfully promoted decriminalization measures in several U.S. states while also shaping international models for social equity requirements, record-clearing processes, and community reinvestment programs
United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime	As the keeper of the international drug control treaties, the UNODC faces growing challenges in negotiating outdated conventions with modern cannabis policies. The 1961 Single Convention requires member states to prohibit recreational cannabis, creating tension with reforming nations. While officially maintaining critical positions, UNODC reports now cautiously acknowledge national legalization experiments, reflecting internal debates.

Key Clashes

Public Health vs. Personal Freedom

Supporters of strict regulation argue that government control over cannabis production and sales is essential for ensuring product safety, preventing youth access, and removing health risks such as addiction and mental health issues. They mention successful examples of controlled legalization that utilize power limits, plain packaging, and licensed retailers to demonstrate that regulation can effectively minimize harm. On the other hand, civil rights advocates argue that adults should possess the freedom to make their own consumption choices without extreme government interference. They warn that overly

strict regulations, such as high taxes or limits on purchases, may drive consumers back to illegal markets, thus damaging the objectives of legalization. The central issue lies in balancing the need to protect society with the imperative to respect individual rights.

Law Enforcement Priorities vs. Social Justice

Supporters of decriminalization emphasize that cannabis prohibition has disproportionately affected marginalized communities, with enforcement data revealing significant racial differences in arrests. They argue that police resources should be directed toward serious crimes rather than non-violent drug offenses and that legalization would enable the eradication of past convictions. On the other hand, some law enforcement groups argue that eliminating penalties for possession may lead to increased public disorder and complicate efforts to combat other drugs. This conflict is particularly enunciated in jurisdictions where police budgets are linked to drug confiscations, fostering resistance to reform.

Economic Growth vs. Corporate Dominance

Legalization advocates highlight the economic benefits of regulated markets, including job creation, tax revenue for social programs, and the disruption of the illicit drug trade. They argue that a legal framework can stimulate local economies and foster innovation. However, activists caution that without careful design, legal markets risk being monopolized by large corporations, such as tobacco or alcohol companies, which may squeeze out small growers and create inequities.

International Treaties vs. National Sovereignty

The 1961 UN Single Convention requires member states to prohibit recreational cannabis, leading to legal conflicts with countries that have chosen to legalize it. Reform advocates argue that these treaties are outdated and intrude on national self-determination, arguing that regulated markets manage drug-related harms more effectively than prohibition. Conversely, opponents, including certain UN bodies, caution that violating international law undermines global cooperation in combating more dangerous drugs. This clash intensifies as more nations defy the treaties, raising critical questions about whether the international drug control framework requires reform or if such actions risk destabilizing collaborative efforts against crime.

Medical vs. Recreational Use

While medical cannabis is widely accepted, recreational legalization remains controversial. Health professionals support medical access but warn that normalizing recreational use could lead to increased misuse, citing studies linking heavy cannabis use to psychiatric risks. Recreational advocates argue that separating "medical" and

"adult-use" markets creates unnecessary stigma and artificial shortages, advocating for a cooperative approach to improve accessibility and maintain safety standards.

Past Actions

Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs (1961)

This landmark international treaty established the foundation for global cannabis prohibition when adopted on March 30, 1961. As the first comprehensive UN drug control agreement, it required member states to restrict cannabis use solely to medical and scientific purposes, criminalizing all other uses. The convention classified cannabis alongside heroin as a dangerous substance with no recognized value, a determination that shaped national drug policies worldwide for decades. Over 180 countries eventually approved the treaty, creating a unified prohibitionist framework that discouraged alternative regulatory approaches until the 21st century.

Decriminalization Movement (1970s–1990s)

Beginning in the 1970s, several nations pioneered decriminalization policies that eliminated criminal penalties for personal cannabis possession while maintaining prohibitions on production and distribution. These early reforms typically replaced criminal sanctions with civil fines or drug education programs, marking a significant departure from strict prohibition models. This approach demonstrated that reducing penalties for minor offenses could ease the burden on criminal justice systems without causing dramatic increases in usage rates.

Medical Cannabis Recognition (1990s–2000s)

The late 20th century saw increasing international acceptance of cannabis for therapeutic purposes, with various jurisdictions establishing regulated medical programs. These systems typically required physician oversight and provided legal protections for qualified patients while maintaining prohibitions on recreational use. The medical cannabis movement offered crucial evidence that regulated access could be implemented safely, challenged long-standing assumptions about the drug's dangers, and generated pressure for reforms to international drug control treaties.

First National Legalization Framework (2012)

The world's first comprehensive national legalization of recreational cannabis was implemented in December 2012, establishing a government-regulated system for adult use. This model allowed licensed retail sales, personal cultivation, and nonprofit cannabis clubs while enforcing strict rules on advertising and public use. It significantly reduced

arrests for cannabis offenses and weakened illegal market operators. However, there were challenges in implementing the policy, including bureaucratic delays and difficulties in moving consumers from illegal to legal sources.

UN Cannabis Rescheduling (2020)

In a historic shift on December 2, 2020, the United Nations Commission on Narcotic Drugs voted to remove cannabis from Schedule IV of the 1961 drug treaty, where it had been categorized alongside heroin as particularly harmful. This recognition of cannabis's medical potential marked a significant modernization of international drug control policy. While the decision didn't require changes to domestic laws, it validated nations developing medical cannabis programs and signaled growing global acceptance of reform.

Modern Regulatory Models (2018–Present)

Recent cannabis legalization frameworks have learned from earlier experiments to create comprehensive systems that address public health, safety, and social equity. These models typically include strict quality controls, power limits, and packaging requirements, alongside measures to correct historical injustices from prohibition. Many frameworks feature social equity programs, such as expunging past convictions and prioritizing business licenses for communities disproportionately affected by drug enforcement. While these systems have generated significant tax revenues and reduced illegal market activity, challenges persist regarding cross-border trade restrictions under international law.

Global Industry Standards Development (2019–Present)

Since 2019, international organizations and industry groups have been working to establish voluntary standards for legal cannabis markets, focusing on product safety, testing methods, and sustainability practices. These efforts aim to create consistency across jurisdictions while addressing concerns about pesticide use, contamination, and accurate potency labeling. The development of shared standards has become crucial as more nations implement legal frameworks and seek to engage in the growing global cannabis market while adhering to international drug control responsibilities.

WHO Cannabis Recommendations (2019)

In 2019, the World Health Organization issued formal recommendations to modify international drug control measures regarding cannabis. These recommendations included recognizing cannabis's medical utility and removing certain cannabis-related substances from controlled drug schedules. Although not all recommendations were adopted, the WHO's intervention marked a significant institutional acknowledgment of the

evolving scientific understanding of cannabis and its potential benefits, further legitimizing national reform efforts worldwide.

Potential Solutions

1. International Treaty Modernization

The global community must update outdated drug control treaties to reflect modern scientific understanding and policy realities. This requires creating new international frameworks that allow regulated cannabis markets while keeping strict controls against abuse and illegal diversion. These reforms should set universal standards for product safety, labeling, and potency limits, while respecting each country's right to implement its policies. Updated treaties could include monitoring systems to track public health outcomes and ensure adherence to harm reduction principles, balancing local flexibility with global cooperation.

2. Social Equity and Restorative Justice Programs

Legalization efforts must include comprehensive measures to address the disproportionate harms caused by decades of prohibition. This includes automatically clearing past cannabis convictions, providing targeted business support for communities affected by the war on drugs, and reinvesting cannabis tax revenue into education and job training programs. These initiatives should focus on long-term sustainability, ensuring that economic benefits reach those most impacted by previous enforcement policies. By prioritizing equity in licensing and economic opportunities, such programs can help repair historical injustices while creating more inclusive legal markets.

3. Science-Based Public Health Regulations

Effective cannabis policy requires strong public health protections based on current medical research. This includes implementing strict product testing requirements, clear warning labels about potential risks, and restrictions on marketing practices that may appeal to underage users. Public education campaigns should provide accurate information on responsible use patterns and potential health consequences, especially for vulnerable populations. Healthcare systems need resources to properly train medical professionals in cannabis therapeutics and monitor potential misuse, creating a balanced approach that respects adult access while safeguarding community health.

4. Transition Programs for Illicit Market Participants

Successful legalization needs clear ways for existing illegal operators to join the regulated system. This includes easier licensing for small producers, temporary amnesty periods,

and support programs to help them meet regulations. Tax structures should be adjusted to keep legal products competitive with illegal ones without promoting excessive use. By addressing the economic factors that support illegal operations, these measures can enhance the public safety benefits of legalization while minimizing disruption to those who depend on cannabis for their livelihoods.

5. Global Knowledge Sharing and Research Collaboration

An international cannabis research network would greatly assist in the establishment of evidence-based policies across the world. It would coordinate large studies on health effects, marketing trends, and regulatory outcomes associated with different policies. Standardized methods of data collection would allow for comparison, timely dissemination of information concerning newly arising public health concerns, and reliable evidence available to all countries to guide their policy prescriptions, irrespective of whether they are being legalized or not.

Guiding Questions

- **How do different legal frameworks impact public health outcomes like youth use rates and addiction treatment access?**
- **What economic benefits have legalized countries experienced, and how does this balance against implementation costs?**
- **How have cannabis laws historically affected marginalized communities, and what reparative measures exist in legal frameworks?**
- **What challenges do countries face when legalizing cannabis while still bound by international drug treaties (e.g., UN 1961 Single Convention)?**
- **How do prohibitionist countries justify maintaining strict bans despite global trends toward legalization?**
- **What role do pharmaceutical companies play in shaping medical cannabis policies worldwide?**
- **How effective are harm reduction strategies in legal markets compared to punitive approaches?**

- **Can regulated legal markets actually reduce organized crime influence, or do they simply shift illicit activities elsewhere?**
- **How might emerging technologies (blockchain tracking, lab testing) improve cannabis regulation and consumer safety?**
- **What lessons can be drawn from countries that transitioned gradually versus those that implemented full legalization abruptly?**

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