DEBATE. INSPIRE. ACHIEVE.

# UNODC

## United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime

AGENDA: Addressing the proliferation of Synthetic Drugs and New Psychoactive Substances including "Kush" in West Africa and their linkages to Organized Crime.

# Letter From the Executive Board

Dear Delegates,
We are very pleased to welcome you to the simulation of the ***UNODC*** at ***SMUN 2025***. It is an honour to serve as your Executive Board for the duration of the conference. This Background Guide is designed to give you an insight into the case at hand, so we hope this acts as only a ***catalyst*** for furthering your research and not limited to just this guide. Please refer to it carefully. Remember, a thorough understanding of the problem is the first step to solving it.

*Do understand that this Background Guide is in no way exhaustive and is only meant to provide you with enough background information to establish a platform for beginning the research*. Delegates are highly recommended to do a good amount of research beyond what is covered in the Guide. The guide cannot be used as proof during the committee proceedings under any circumstances.

We understand that MUN conferences can be an overwhelming experience for first-timers but it must be noted that our aspirations from the delegates are not how experienced or articulate they are. Rather, we want to see how one manages the balance to respect disparities and differences of opinion and work around this while extending their foreign policy to present comprehensive solutions without compromising on their self-interests and initiate consensus building.

New ideas are by their very nature disruptive, but far less disruptive than a world set against the backdrop of stereotypes and regional instability due to which reform is essential in policy making and conflict resolution. At any point during your research, do not hesitate to contact the Executive Board Members for clarifications or in case you need help in any other aspect. We look forward to a fruitful discussion and an enriching experience with all of you.

**Best regards,**

*Eswar Chava*
**Chairperson**

*Mithul Adithya*
**Vice Chairperson**

*Siri Vaidhula*
**Rapporteur**

# Important Points to Remember

A few aspects that delegates should keep in mind while preparing:

1. **Procedure:** The purpose of putting in procedural rules in any committee is to ensure a more organized and efficient debate. The committee will follow the UNA-USA Rules of Procedure. Although the Executive Board shall be fairly strict with the Rules of Procedure, the discussion of the agenda will be the main priority. So, delegates are advised not to restrict their statements due to hesitation regarding procedure.
2. **Foreign Policy:** Following the foreign policy of one's country is the most important aspect of a Model UN Conference. This is what essentially differentiates a Model UN from other debating formats. To violate one's foreign policy without adequate reason is one of the worst mistakes a delegate can make.
3. **Role of the Executive Board:** The Executive Board is appointed to facilitate debate. The committee shall decide the direction and flow of debate. The delegates are the ones who constitute the committee and hence must be uninhibited while presenting their opinions/stance on any issue. However, the Executive Board may put forward questions and/or ask for clarifications at all points of time to further debate and test participants.
4. **Nature of Source/Evidence:** This Background Guide is meant solely for research purposes and must not be cited as evidence to substantiate statements made during the conference. Evidence or proof for substantiating statements made during formal debate is acceptable from the following sources:

    a. **United Nations:** Documents and findings by the United Nations or any related UN body is held as a credible proof to support a claim or argument. Multilateral Organizations: Documents from international organizations like OIC, NATO, SAARC, BRICS, EU, ASEAN, the International Court of Justice, etc. may also be presented as credible sources of information.

    b. **Government Reports:** These reports can be used in a similar way as the State Operated News Agencies reports and can, in all circumstances, be denied by another country.

    c. **News Sources:**

    1. Reuters: Any Reuters article that clearly makes mention of the fact or is in contradiction of the fact being stated by a delegate in council.
    2. State operated News Agencies: These reports can be used in the support of or against the State that owns the News Agency. These reports, if credible or substantial enough, can be used in support of or against any country as such but in that situation, may be denied by any other country in the council. Some examples are – RIA Novosti (Russian Federation), Xinhua News Agency (People's Republic of China), etc.

****Please Note*: Reports from NGOs working with UNESCO, UNICEF and other UN bodies will be accepted. **Under no circumstances will sources like Wikipedia, or newspapers like the Guardian, Times of India, etc. be accepted.** However, notwithstanding the criteria for acceptance of sources and evidence, delegates are still free to quote/cite from any source as they deem fit as a part of their statements.

## Guidelines

- Read the entirety of the background guide in the order it was written. Make sure to highlight the names of specific treaties, documents, resolutions, conventions, international bodies, events and any other specific incidents so that you can get back to them later and do a lot more thorough research.

- Understand some of the basic details regarding the country that you've been allotted whether this be the capital, current affairs regarding geopolitical situation, political hierarchy etc. While not strictly necessary, you never know when this can turn out to be handy. Geography Now's A - Z Country List has been a particularly helpful resource for this.

- Use a search engine of your choice to create as many tabs as possible for the highlighted terms from your background guide. Wikipedia or a YouTube video act as a great way to get a brief summary of the incidents at hand but such sources (especially Wikipedia articles) cannot be used in committee as sources.

- Delve into deeper research regarding the particular position of your allocation with the agenda at hand. Try searching for the voting stances of your allocation in related conventions and understanding the reasons for voting as so. UN Press Releases are also a helpful source for this matter.

- Find the website for the foreign ministry of the country you have been assigned alongside the "Permanent Mission of COUNTRY to the United Nations" website and search for a key term relating to the agenda, this should often give you statements from recent press conferences or UN committee sessions that can act as valuable sources of information in forming a position.

- Keep a handy copy of the Charter of the United Nations, whether as a .pdf file extension or a physical copy works. This contains the founding principles of the United Nations and contains articles that lay out the mandate of the six bodies that the United Nations is primarily divided into. Spend some additional time researching the specific mandate and functions of the committee that you have been assigned.

- The Executive Board may ask for the source of a statement that a delegate makes in committee either during a Point of Order circumstance or if said statement stands to be of interest to the Executive Board. Therefore, it is recommended that delegates keep track of their sources when making / disputing a claim and also ensure their validity. Please do remember that while you as a delegate are allowed to cite any source you wish during committee.

# Hierarchy of evidence

Evidence can be presented from a wide variety of sources, but not all sources are treated as equal. Here's the hierarchy in which evidence is categorised:

***Tier 1:*** Includes any publication, statement, resolution, or document released by any of the Nations' official organs or committees; any publication, statement, or document released by a UN member state in its own capacity. The evidence falling in this tier is considered most reliable during the simulation.

***Tier 2:*** Includes: any news article published by any official media source that is owned and controlled by a UN member state. E.g.: Xinhua News (China), Prasar Bharti (India), BBC (United Kingdom) etcetera. The evidence falling in this tier is considered sufficiently reliable in case no other evidence from any Tier 1 source is available on that particular fact, event, or situation.

***Tier 3:*** Includes: any publication from news sources of international repute such as Reuters, The New York Times, Agence-France Presse, etcetera. The evidence falling under this tier is considered the least reliable for the purposes of this simulation. Yet, if no better source is available in a certain scenario, it may be considered.

# Foreign Policy and Foreign Relations

Foreign policy, in simple terms, is what your country aims to achieve in regard to the issue at hand or in general with its relations with other countries.

***1. What role must foreign policy play in your research?***
Understanding the foreign policy of your country must be a checkbox that you tick off at the very beginning of your research.
Your foreign policy should dictate everything from the arguments you make, the reasoning you give for making those arguments, and the actions you take in the Council.

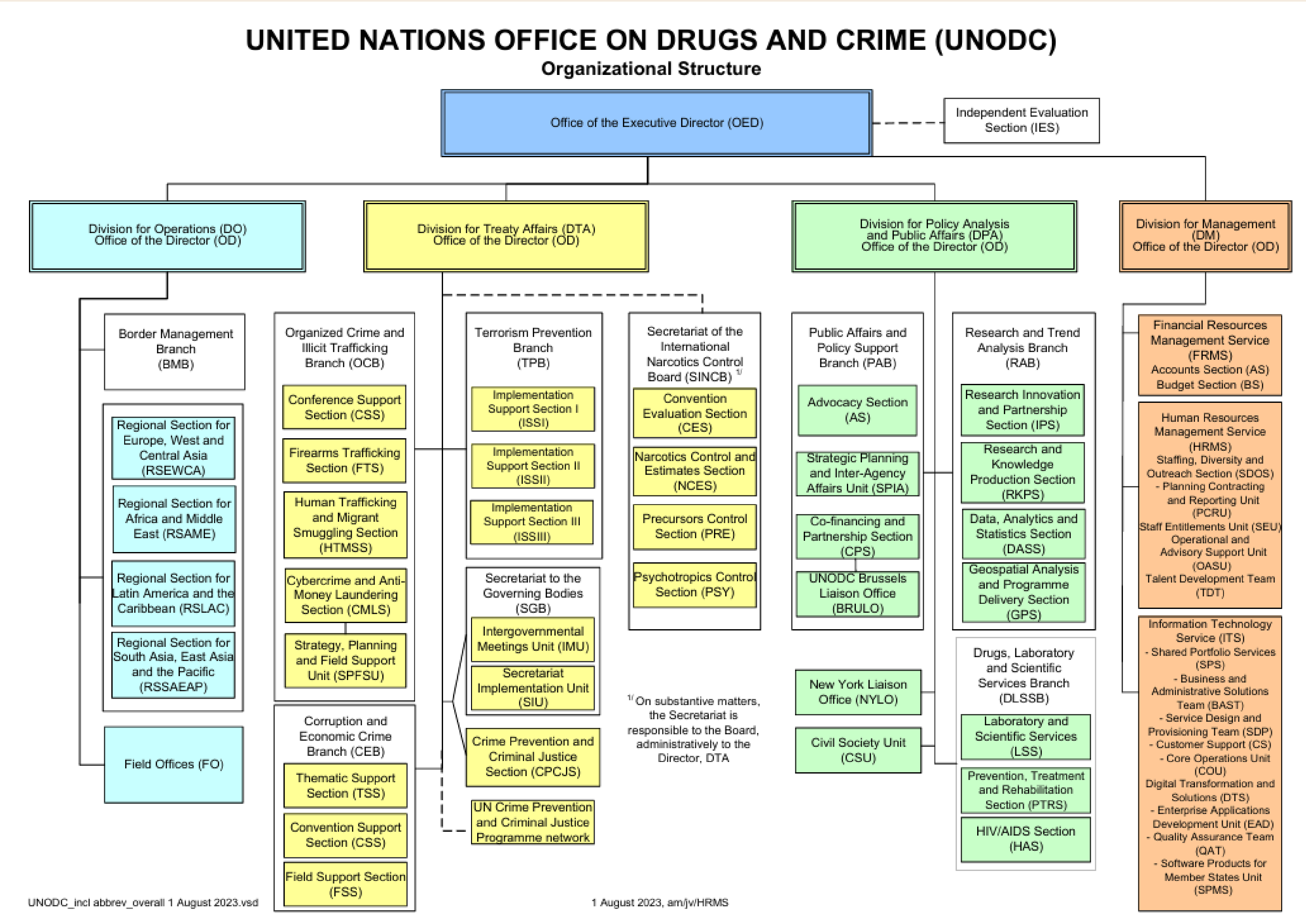
***2. Where do I look to find foreign policy?***
Most of the time, foreign policy is not explicitly stated. It must be inferred from the actions and statements issued by the country. Reading the meeting records from previous meetings of UNSC (or any other UN body where your country might have spoken on the issue) is a great place to start. If such records are unavailable, look for statements from your country's Foreign Ministry (or equivalent like Ministry of External Affairs, Ministry for Foreign Affairs etcetera) and top leadership (PM, Pres., Secretary of State, Defence Minister).

Foreign Relations on the other hand refers to the diplomatic ties that one country has with another and considers elements such as the mutual presence of embassies, consulates, ambassadors & diplomatic dialogue. More often than not, foreign policy is what will be of your primary concern during the MUN, but it is important to also consider any extremities in your allotted country's foreign relations.

# About the Committee

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) is a specialized UN agency established in 1997 to assist Member States in combating illicit drugs, organized crime, corruption, and terrorism. Headquartered in Vienna, Austria, the UNODC operates through a global network of field offices that support countries in implementing international conventions and promoting the rule of law.

The committee's (or office) activities span drug control, criminal justice reform, human trafficking prevention, anti-money laundering measures, and counterterrorism assistance. Through its governing bodies, such as the Commission on Narcotic Drugs (CND) and the Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice (CCPCJ), the UNODC provides a platform for dialogue, coordination, and policy development. Ultimately, its mission is to achieve security, justice and health for all by addressing threats that undermine peace, stability, and sustainable development.



## History

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) is a global leader in combating illicit drugs, international crime, and terrorism. It was established in 1997 through the merger of the United Nations International Drug Control Programme (UNDCP) and the Centre for International Crime Prevention (CICP). The UNODC's broad mandate aims to assist Member States in tackling transnational threats that jeopardize security, development, and justice worldwide. The office works across several areas, including drug control, crime prevention, criminal justice reform, and anti-corruption efforts.

Through international cooperation, conducting research, and providing technical assistance, the UNODC helps countries develop policies, laws, and capacities to combat crime and ensure justice for all. The roots of the UNODC date back to early 20th-century efforts to address drug-related issues. The UNODC was formed in 1997 by merging two separate UN offices:

- The United Nations International Drug Control Programme (UNDCP), which focused on drug-related concerns.
- The Centre for International Crime Prevention (CICP), which focused on crime prevention, particularly in relation to transnational organized crime and corruption. In 2002, the office was renamed UNODC to reflect its broader mandate, which now includes counter-terrorism and a wider focus on justice and the rule of law.

## Mandate

Its mandate derives from several key instruments, including the UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (2000) and the UN Convention against Corruption (2003). UNODC’s work is structured around three main pillars: (1) research and analysis to improve data-driven policymaking; (2) normative support to help states implement international legal frameworks; and (3) field-based technical cooperation to strengthen national institutions.

Broadly its mandate covers several key global challenges:

- Combating illicit drugs: It works to reduce both the supply and demand for illicit drugs by supporting international agreements, law enforcement, and public health initiatives.
- Addressing transnational organized crime: This includes tackling human trafficking, migrant smuggling, and wildlife crime through global cooperation and capacity-building.
- Fighting corruption: UNODC helps countries implement the UN Convention against Corruption (UNCAC) to fight corruption in both the public and private sectors.
- Countering terrorism: The office supports countries in strengthening legal frameworks and coordinating global counter-terrorism efforts.
- Promoting criminal justice reform: It helps improve criminal justice systems by enhancing the capacity of institutions to uphold human rights, improve prison conditions, and strengthen the rule of law.

- Addressing cybercrime: As digital threats grow, UNODC offers expertise to help Member States combat cybercrime.
- Human rights in criminal justice: Ensuring that criminal justice reforms adhere to international human rights standards is central to its work.

# Commission on Narcotic Drugs (CND)

The Commission on Narcotic Drugs (CND) was established by Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) Resolution 9(I) in 1946, to assist the ECOSOC in supervising the application of the international drug control treaties. In 1991, the General Assembly (GA) expanded the mandate of the CND to function as the governing body of UNODC (A/RES/46/104). The CND's agenda has two distinct segments: a normative segment for discharging treaty-based and normative functions; and an operational segment for exercising the role as the governing body of UNODC.

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The CND meets annually and adopts a range of decisions and resolutions. Intersessional meetings are convened throughout the year. Towards the end of each year, the Commission meets at a reconvened session to consider budgetary and administrative matters as the governing body of the United Nations drug programme.

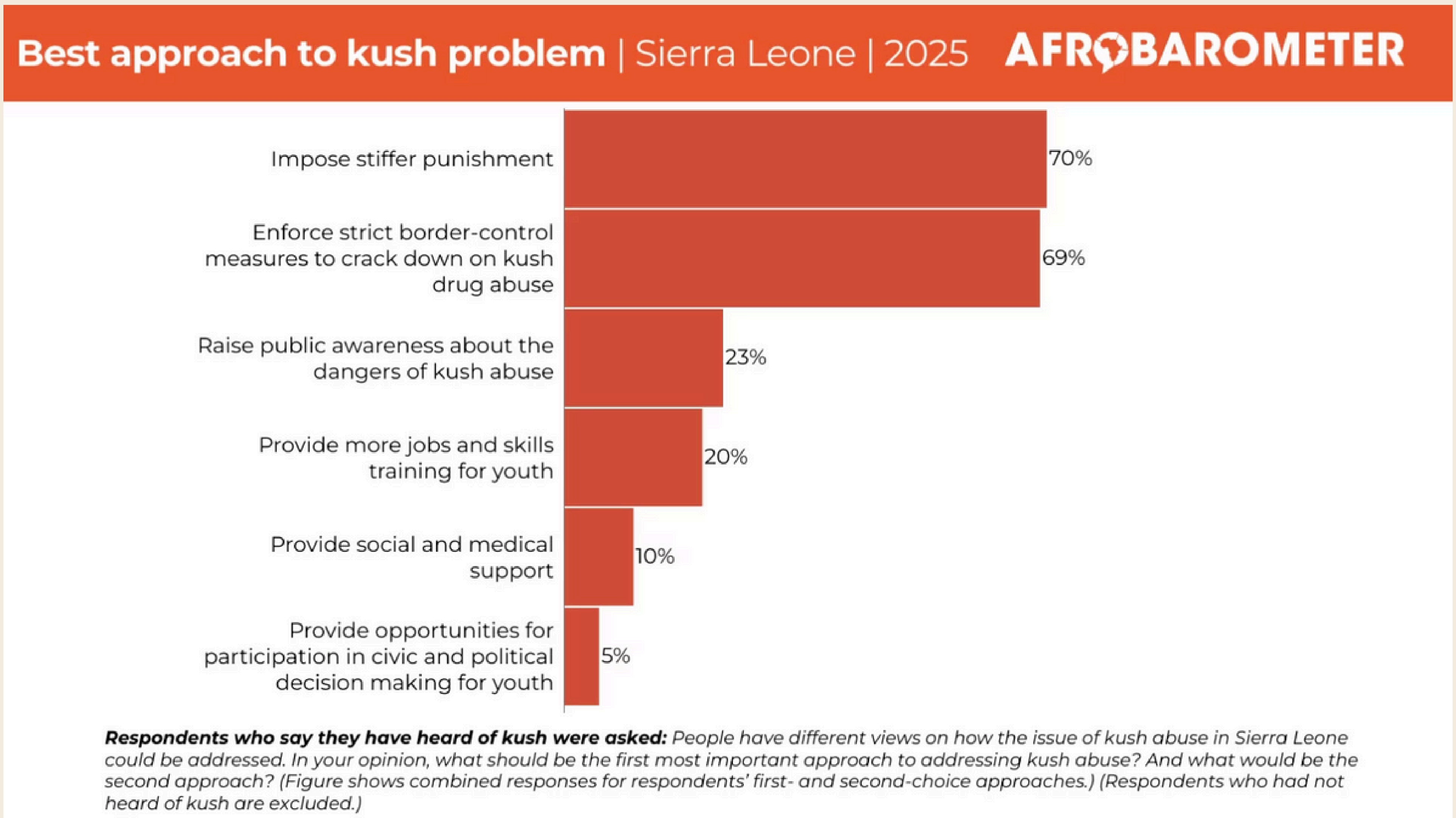
- The CND reviews and analyzes the global drug situation, considering supply and demand reduction. It takes action through resolutions and decisions.
- The commission has 53 member states that are elected by ECOSOC. It is chaired by a Bureau including one member per Regional Group.
- It has adopted the 2019 Ministerial Declaration to accelerate the implementation of joint commitments to address and counter the world drug problem.
- The CND has five subsidiary bodies: the Heads of National Drug Law Enforcement Agencies in Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean, Asia and the Pacific and Africa, and the Sub commission in the Near and Middle East.

# Background

Across West Africa, the rise of synthetic drugs and New Psychoactive Substances (NPS) has triggered a public health and security crisis. One of the most alarming examples is “Kush,” a substance that originated in Sierra Leone and is now spreading rapidly across the region. Although marketed as cannabis, Kush is often a dangerous blend of synthetic opioids like Nitazenes, many times stronger than fentanyl, and synthetic cannabinoids. This marks a disturbing shift in the drug market, where users are unknowingly exposed to highly toxic compounds.

Kush is cheap, accessible, making it especially appealing to young people and vulnerable communities. Its effects are devastating. Users frequently exhibit psychosis, or zombie-like violent behaviour. These symptoms have overwhelmed Sierra Leone’s Psychiatric Teaching Hospital, the country’s only psychiatric facility, which is now facing a surge in admissions far beyond its capacity. The mental health impact is serious, and families are struggling to cope with the emotional and social fallout. The spread of Kush is driven by organized criminal networks that exploit weak regulatory frameworks and limited law enforcement capacity.

The precursor chemicals used in Kush production are easy to smuggle and difficult to trace, allowing traffickers to operate with escape from consequences. These groups are part of larger criminal networks in the region and beyond, making money by taking advantage of people's addiction and the problems it creates. This committee will address the proliferation of synthetic drugs and NPS like Kush in West Africa, with a focus on their linkages to organized crime. It will examine the gaps in regulation, enforcement, and healthcare systems that allow these substances to flourish.




## Synthetic Drugs

Synthetic drugs are man-made substances that are chemically altered in laboratories to imitate the effects of illegal drugs, often to avoid existing drug laws. A major category within this group is New Psychoactive Substances (NPS), drugs created to produce similar effects to controlled substances while using different chemical structures that have not yet been regulated. Because many of these substances are new and not thoroughly tested, their health risks are poorly understood and can be severe or even fatal. Common examples include synthetic cannabinoids, phenethylamines, tryptamines, and certain benzodiazepines.

The United Nations does not provide a single, formal, universally agreed-upon definition of a *"Synthetic Drug."* However, the term is widely used operationally by the UNODC and other international drug control bodies to describe a specific category of substances:

*“Substances produced entirely by chemical synthesis, rather than derived from plant materials, that have psychoactive effects and are controlled under the international drug control conventions.”*

## New Psychoactive Substances (NPS)

New Psychoactive Substances (NPS), especially synthetic cannabinoids and nitazene-class opioids, are now playing a central role in the Kush crisis across West Africa. These substances are constantly altered in illicit labs. Nitazenes are extremely powerful opioids responsible for sudden overdoses and rapid addiction among young users. Synthetic cannabinoids often create unpredictable and harmful effects, from severe anxiety and hallucinations to organ failure. International organizations have warned that the rise of highly potent NPS is putting already weak health systems under extreme pressure and strengthening the role of organized crime in drug markets. This has flagged these substances as a “major challenge” for drug control and public health efforts in regions such as West Africa.

NPS also cover a heterogeneous and rapidly evolving set of chemicals and less commonly, plant-derived products designed to mimic the psychoactive effects of established drugs (cannabis, opioids, stimulants, hallucinogens). They include synthetic cannabinoids, cathinones (bath salts), novel benzodiazepines, tryptamines, phenethylamines, and emerging opioid classes such as nitazenes, plus complex mixtures and so-called “herbal highs.” Many are structural analogues of controlled drugs, but manufacturers tweak chemical structures to circumvent controls and detection, producing large numbers of new variants. These substances vary widely in potency, toxicology and pharmacology, creating major clinical and forensic challenges.

## What is “Kush”?

“Kush” is a street drug widely used in Sierra Leone and now spreading across West Africa. It is usually plant material mixed with strong synthetic chemicals to create a more intense high, which is why many people mistake it for a stronger form of cannabis. In reality, it is extremely dangerous. The effects can range from extreme sedation and confusion to organ damage and sudden collapse because users do not know what they are taking. Kush is causing widespread addiction, serious health emergencies, and growing social harm in the communities where it is used. According to the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime laboratory analyses reveal that Kush is often composed of synthetic cannabinoids or nitazene class synthetic opioids and compounds up to 25 times more potent than fentanyl.


## Emergence and Geographic Spread

The drug first emerged in Sierra Leone around 2020–2021, spreading rapidly across Liberia, Guinea, The Gambia, Guinea-Bissau, Senegal, Ghana and Nigeria, driven by ease of manufacture, porous borders, and regional trafficking routes. Its use is heavily concentrated among unemployed youth and urban poor populations, with users seeking cheap and intense psychoactive effects. Researchers estimate that thousands of people may already have died from Kush use in West Africa.

Young men aged 18–30 form the predominant user group, who have suffered rising psychiatric admissions, weight loss, organ damage and social disengagement. The mortality rate has surged dramatically, with Sierra Leonean authorities and hospitals reporting hundreds of Kush-related deaths and thousands of psychiatric and overdose cases since 2023, prompting a national public health emergency in April 2024.

## Immediate Public-Health and Security Impacts

The public-health impacts are catastrophic: widespread organ failure, respiratory depression, psychosis, and violent or suicidal behaviour, alongside rising rates of gender-based violence, crime, and social breakdown. Security agencies link the trade to organized criminal networks engaged in cross-border precursor smuggling from Asia and Europe, exploiting weak regulatory oversight. The chemical composition of Kush varies between batches and regions, complicating treatment and forensic identification, while local laboratories often lack the capacity for advanced toxicological analysis.

The impact of Kush has moved beyond individual health problems and are now creating wider public health and security concerns. Sierra Leone Psychiatric Teaching Hospital, the country’s only psychiatric hospital, is flooded with people brought in under sedation or in a psychotic state. At the same time, the instability created by addiction and drug markets is straining governance by communities witnessing increased crime, family breakdowns, and a sense of risk among young people who feel trapped.

## Chemical Composition and its Variability

Despite its prevalence, there has been a lack of clarity over its chemical composition. Laboratory testing of the synthetic drug Kush reveals serious variability in chemical composition. It has been found that over 50% of tested samples contained nitazene-class opioids which are extremely potent synthetic opioids flagged as an emerging global threat. The remainder largely consisted of synthetic cannabinoids, with some samples combining both types of substances. It is made informally with imported chemicals and crude spray-on methods. Each batch of Kush can vary greatly in its effects and its level of danger.

The chemical composition of Kush varies between batches and regions, complicating treatment and forensic identification, while local laboratories often lack the capacity for advanced toxicological analysis. Laboratory analyses conducted by the UNODC, Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC), and Sierra Leone's National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA) between 2023–2025 reveal that Kush commonly contains combinations of synthetic cannabinoids (such as MDMB-4en-PINACA, AB-FUBINACA, or 5F-ADB), synthetic opioids (especially nitazene-class compounds like protonitazene, isotonitazene, and metonitazene), and psychoactive adulterants such as tramadol, diazepam or fentanyl analogues.

In many samples, these are sprayed onto inert plant material such as tea leaves, tobacco, or dried herbs to mimic cannabis, though the potency is several hundred times stronger and highly toxic even in microgram quantities. Due to the absence of quality control, chemical variability across batches and borders is extreme: forensic comparisons between Kush samples from Freetown (Sierra Leone), Monrovia (Liberia), and Banjul (The Gambia) show completely different dominant psychoactive agents, with varying proportions of cannabinoids, opioids, and benzodiazepines. This chemical variability means that users can never be sure of what they are taking which significantly increases the risk of overdose, organ damage, or sudden collapse.

## Early-warning and Reporting Mechanisms

Global institutions recognise the threat posed by NPS, and the UNODC's Early Warning Advisory (EWA) system is a key tool for detection and analysis. The system collects data on new substances, patterns of harm and chemical information, and aims to support nations in setting up national early warning mechanisms. In the context of Kush, these mechanisms are essential to understanding its spread, tracking deaths and hospital admissions, and alerting health authorities and law enforcement so that timely action can be taken.

**A. United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC)**
The UNODC has taken targeted steps through its Early Warning Advisory on New Psychoactive Substances (NPS), operating under the Global SMART Programme. According to reports, the EWA collects laboratory and toxicology data from Member States to monitor emerging substances, provides national authorities with forensic-reference tools and capacity-building support, and serves as a global knowledge hub. It identifies nitazene-class opioids and synthetic cannabinoids as substances of concern. The UNODC's World Drug Report recognises the growing threat of NPS in West Africa, aligning with reports that Kush contains such compounds. Despite these efforts, the pace and scale of this drug continue to leave health systems and law enforcement agencies in many countries under severe pressure and struggling to keep pace with the crisis.

**B. World Health Organization (WHO)**
The World Health Organization has taken significant action to address the growing threat of synthetic substances found in Kush, particularly nitazene opioids and synthetic cannabinoids. Through its Expert Committee on Drug Dependence, the WHO has reviewed these substances to assess their health risks, abuse potential and social harm. In March 2025, the WHO's recommendations were accepted by the United Nations Commission on Narcotic Drugs, resulting in four nitazene class opioids being placed in Schedule I of the 1961 Single Convention and a semi synthetic cannabinoid being scheduled under the 1971 Convention. The WHO has also supported affected countries by strengthening prevention, treatment and community level services and by promoting wider access to naloxone to prevent deaths from opioid overdose. Both the UNODC and the WHO stress that a united effort is essential.

## Market & Supply chain Analysis

"Kush" has followed a two-phase manufacturing trajectory. Early in its emergence it arrived as imported, pre-manufactured finished product. As in liquid batches of synthetic cannabinoids or nitazene-containing solutions that were already synthesized abroad and shipped into West Africa for immediate retail (sprayed on plant matter or sold as prepped product). As authorities and researchers tracked the market, suppliers shifted to supplying precursor chemicals and "kits" (raw reagents, solvent, reaction intermediates and online synthesis instructions) which allow local operators to synthesise active compounds or to convert bulk precursors into psychoactive liquids domestically.

This shift reduces shipping costs, complicates attribution, and enables local "value capture" by criminal networks. Simultaneously, more sophisticated synthesis in local labs has been observed in urban centres (notably Freetown), where small clandestine labs (secretive) adapt analogue recipes to available reagents by producing a range of different active molecules depending on what precursor mixes are obtainable. The hybrid dynamic accelerates chemical variety and makes enforcement harder.

## Precursors and Reagents

Common precursors/reagents linked to synthetic cannabinoid and nitazene production include (but are not limited to) the following: substituted indazole/indole core precursors, acyl chlorides/acid anhydrides, fluorinated alkyl chain precursors, alkyl halides, various amines and carbamate reagents, and solvents such as acetone, dichloromethane, methanol, and triethylamine. For nitazenes specifically, precursors often involve benzyl/phenethyl amine building blocks, nitro/azido intermediates and specialized heterocyclic synthons that are routinely available from chemical suppliers.

Many precursors originate from Asia (notably the PRC) and to a lesser extent, European chemical suppliers; they move via parcel post, small consignments concealed in commercial shipments, or as components in shipments of legitimate industrial chemicals. Route patterns include direct small-parcel shipments to West African ports/airports, intermediated shipments routed through Europe or North Africa, and maritime concealment in mixed cargo. Detection/interdiction methods that have been recommended and practised include: targeted container profiling and risk-based inspections; postal/parcel screening with X-ray and chemical trace detection; customs use of advance-cargo data and watchlists for suspicious consignments; cooperation with source-country regulators and marketplaces to trace suppliers; and financial-forensic targeting of buyers.

On the forensic side, interdiction effectiveness depends on access to reference standards, high-resolution mass spectrometry (HRMS) and LC-MS/MS methods to identify unknown molecules and degradation products with capacities that many regional labs currently lack. Strengthening precursor control requires both legal scheduling and industry due-diligence engagements with chemical platforms.

## Trafficking Routes

Trafficking routes mirror West Africa’s broader illicit logistics:

(a) **Sea** — small coastal craft or hidden consignments in containerized cargo to ports (often late-loaded at secondary ports)

(b) **Land** — overland movement across porous borders to urban retail hubs and onward into neighbouring states

(c) **Air/parcel** — increasingly via courier and postal networks using express consignments to urban addresses or drop points

(d) **Human couriers** for small, high-value consignments

These routes piggyback on established cocaine and heroin transit corridors across West Africa, exploiting weak checks at inland transit points and corruption risks. Traffickers often use multimodal shipments (sea to hub port → parcel onward) to obscure origin and complicate chain-of-custody. Intelligence indicates involvement of both local networks and transnational organised crime actors that adapt smuggling techniques from other drug markets.

At sea, concealment in containerized cargo, false-bottom consignments and small wooden dhows operating along the Gulf of Guinea and Atlantic littoral remain common. On land, traffickers leverage porous borders and established intraregional corridors, notably the Mano River Basin (Sierra Leone–Liberia–Guinea), coastal corridors through the Guinea–Sénégal– Gambia and the Côte d'Ivoire–Ghana–Togo axis to distribute product to urban retail hubs

Kush’s commercial logic is simple and devastating: extremely low unit cost, intense psychoactive effects, and wide availability. Reports indicate street-level pricing as low as a few cents to a fraction of a US dollar per dose in some markets, making it affordable even for unemployed youth. The combination of low price, aggressive local marketing (brand names, packaging), and the substitution effect (users switching from traditional substances because of cost/availability) produces rapid uptake among marginalized urban populations. Economic drivers like high youth unemployment, social exclusion, and lack of recreational alternatives tend to create demand-side vulnerability; traffickers exploit this with micro-sales, credit systems and local distribution networks. The attractiveness is compounded by misinformation and underestimation of potency (users often believe it is “cannabis-like”), leading to high rates of overdose, dependence and social harm.

## Linkages to Organized Crime

The synthetic drugs and NPS market in West Africa is served by a layered, adaptive ecosystem of criminal actors rather than a singular group. At the top are transnational organised-crime groups (TOCs) and sophisticated middlemen, that include overseas chemical suppliers, brokers, and logistics facilitators who source precursors/kits and structure shipment chains. These actors use front companies, complex invoicing and third-country routing to obscure origin.

At the regional level comes the commercialised trafficking networks that provide storage, conversion (local synthesis) and distribution. They combine entrepreneurial flexibility with criminal discipline and often maintain links with other illicit trafficking networks (cocaine/heroin corridors). Local organised groups (urban gangs and micro-cartels) run retail distribution, street networks and local production cells. These groups exploit social networks (neighbourhood ties, youth cohorts) to recruit vendors and low-level couriers.

Ancillary facilitators such as corrupt officials, port/airport workers, transporters, money movers, and informal bankers (hawala operators) then provide the lubrication that converts fragmented actors into functioning supply chains. Finally, petty actors (street sellers, runners, end-user dealers) provide last-mile distribution; many are economically vulnerable youth who are easily co-opted or coerced. Structurally, the market combines hierarchical elements with highly networked, decentralised elements, which allows rapid adaptation: if one node is disrupted (a lab raided, a courier arrested), networks immediately re-route synthesis or move to parcel/post channels.

## Money laundering & financial facilitation

Drug proceeds are laundered using common and region-specific typologies:

1. cash-intensive businesses (food stalls, transport unions, retail kiosks) that commingle illicit and legitimate takings
2. trade-based money laundering, over/under-invoicing, false documentation in commodity exports (gold, timber) to move value
3. informal value transfer systems (hawala/cheque-cash networks) and remittance corridors to move funds regionally or to source-country facilitators
4. use of real estate, vehicle purchases and shell companies to integrate proceeds

## Arms Trafficking & Violence

Proceeds from synthetic-drug sales finance procurement of small arms and ammunition, either regionally or via third-party brokers. The drug trade's violence footprint increases when competing local gangs vie for territorial control of retail markets or when debt enforcement and "protection" rackets emerge. Arms facilitate territorial consolidation, coercion of supply chain actors, and intimidation of witnesses, thus raising the stakes for investigators and increasing civilian harm.

## Human Trafficking & exploitation

Human trafficking intersects with NPS markets in multiple ways:

1. use of coerced or debt-bonded couriers and mules (particularly vulnerable migrants or prisoners) to carry parcels across borders
2. exploitation of users and dependants in sex work, forced labour or criminal debt systems
3. recruitment of youth into production/retail under coercion. Women and minors are at particular risk of sexual and economic exploitation when drug dependence and criminal debt are weaponised by networks.

## Illicit Mining

In some West African contexts, revenues from drug markets are laundered through or invested in illicit mining operations (artisanal gold, diamonds), which are cash-based and often located in remote governance-weak areas. Mining infrastructure (transport routes, informal labour markets) can be repurposed to move goods or hide shipments. Conversely, mining camps can be consumer markets for synthetic drugs, increasing local demand and social harms

## Corruption and State capture

Corruption is the grease that makes cross-border trafficking work: bribery of customs officials, police collusion, and manipulation of licensing or inspection regimes allow precursor imports and shipments to transit. At higher levels, corruption can lead to policy capture where regulation is delayed, enforcement is neutralised, or investigations are blocked. Corrupt state/non-state actors thus act as strategic enablers, converting enforcement gaps into systemic vulnerabilities.

## Financial Investigations & Anti-Money Laundering (AML)

Financial flows are intentionally fragmented, informal, and opaque, enabling networks to conceal profits, finance further production, and integrate proceeds into legitimate commerce. These flows move through a mosaic of cash transactions, informal transfer systems, and trade manipulation, with minimal reliance on formal banking channels.

At the retail level, transactions are almost exclusively cash-based, denominated in local currencies (Leone, Liberian Dollar, Naira, CFA Franc), allowing anonymity and avoiding digital traceability. Retail vendors pay small levies upward to local distributors or gang coordinators, who aggregate proceeds for reinvestment in new shipments or precursors. Cash often moves physically via couriers, informal collectors, or cross-border transporters, rather than electronically. At higher tiers, regional consolidators collect bulk cash and employ money mules, exchange offices, or traders to repatriate value. These flows create “shadow liquidity circuits” that bypass formal financial oversight and complicate anti-money-laundering (AML) monitoring.

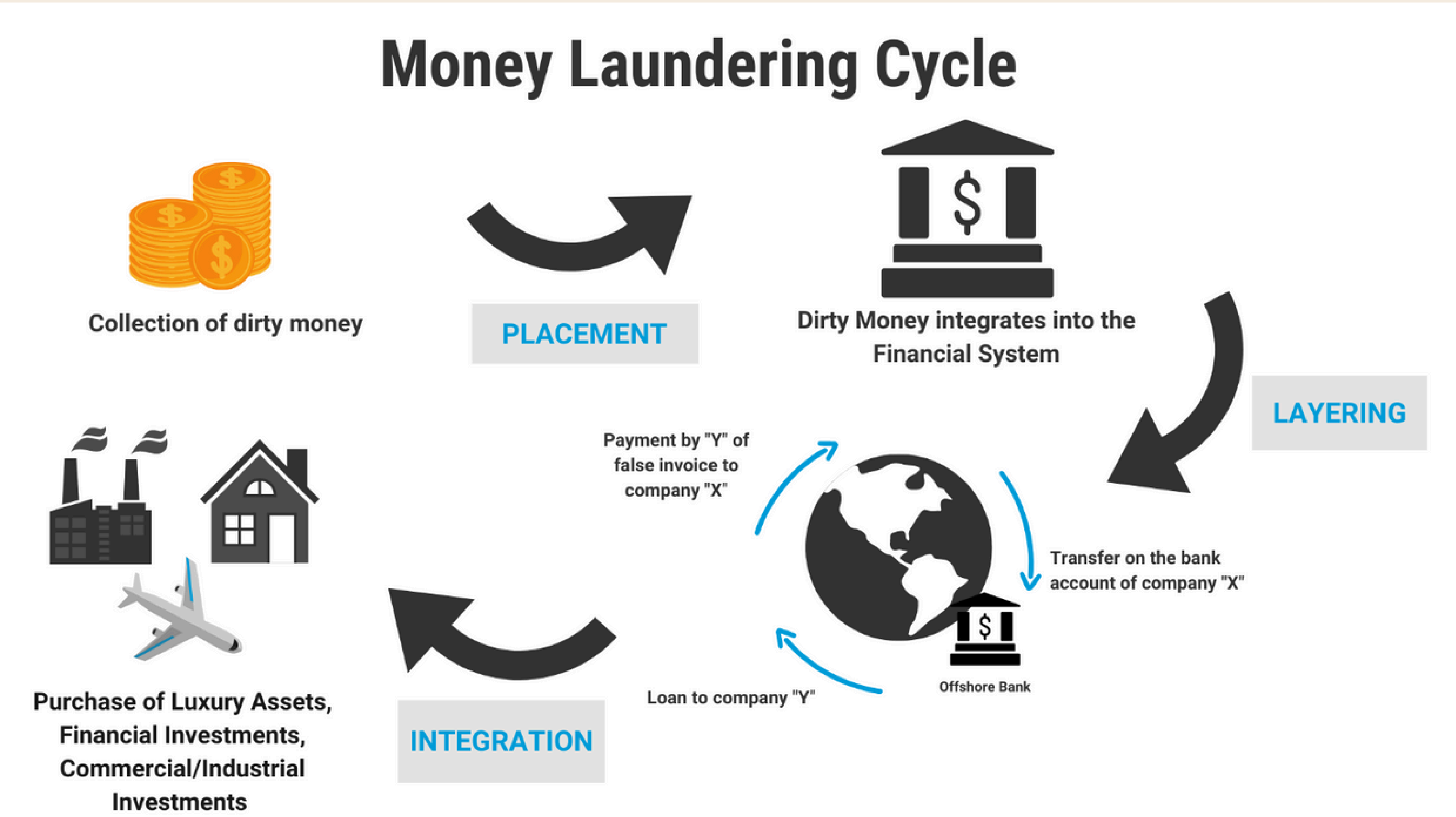
The **hawala** or informal value transfer system is widely used across West Africa for remittances, trade settlements, and diaspora payments. Traffickers exploit these networks to move value internationally without physically transferring money. A drug distributor in Sierra Leone can deliver local cash to a hawaladar, who instructs a counterpart in Dubai, Istanbul, or Guangzhou to settle the equivalent amount with a chemical supplier or intermediary leaving little trace in formal banking records. UNODC’s Global Programme against Money Laundering (GPML) and the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) both identify unregistered hawala and IVTS operators as critical laundering channels in West Africa’s synthetic-drug economy.

Trade manipulation is another dominant laundering method here. Synthetic-drug revenues are reintegrated into commerce through:

- Over/under-invoicing of goods such as spare parts, electronics, or textiles
- Phantom shipments where invoices are issued without goods moving
- Commodities as value vehicles, e.g., gold, cocoa, and timber exports, where criminal actors exaggerate or disguise quantities to shift value internationally

TBML exploits limited customs data integration, weak verification of origin, and large informal cross-border trade volumes. Import/export brokers and freight forwarders often facilitate transactions unwittingly. Routes frequently mirror existing precursor supply chains: for example, a West African importer may over-invoice chemical or industrial goods from Asia to conceal proceeds or pre-pay a synthetic-drug precursor shipment. Regional FIUs and the West African Monetary Zone (WAMZ) task forces have reported increasing overlaps between trade fraud, drug proceeds, and corruption in customs administration, creating a circular economy of illicit finance.

Drug profits are often invested in legitimate cash-heavy enterprises that can absorb and re-emit large amounts of untraceable currency. These sectors enable traffickers to launder small increments regularly, keeping under reporting thresholds. By the time funds enter the formal banking system, often as property transactions or small business deposits, they appear legitimate and disconnected from narcotics proceeds. Effective financial investigations are pivotal to dismantling drug economies but remain underdeveloped in many affected states in Africa.




## Financial Investigations & Anti-Money Laundering (AML)

The case of Sierra Leone's "Kush" epidemic represents one of the most alarming and instructive examples of synthetic drug proliferation in contemporary West Africa. First identified in Freetown around 2020, *Kush* emerged as a cheap, highly addictive street drug marketed as a cannabis substitute but found upon analysis to contain synthetic cannabinoids, nitazene-class opioids, and an array of toxic adulterants such as tramadol, fentanyl analogues, and industrial l solvents. By 2023–2024, its use had reached epidemic proportions across Freetown, Makeni, Bo, and Kenema, primarily among urban youth and unemployed men between 15 to 30 years of age. Hospitals began reporting escalating psychiatric admissions, fatal overdoses, and violent behavioural episodes, prompting Sierra Leone's President Julius Maada Bio in early 2024 to declare the Kush crisis a national public health emergency.

Government agencies, including the Office of National Security (ONS), National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA) and Ministry of Social Welfare, subsequently launched a multi-sectoral task force combining law enforcement, public health, and social reintegration programs. On the law enforcement side, authorities intensified cooperation with INTERPOL and UNODC, focusing on postal inspection, container monitoring, and maritime interdiction at key entry points such as Queen Elizabeth II Quay and Lungi International Airport. Simultaneously, Sierra Leonean police began uncovering clandestine labs in Freetown's suburbs and peri-urban areas, often operated by organized criminal networks with regional ties extending into Liberia and Guinea. These groups were found to be involved not only in drug production but also money laundering, arms trafficking and illegal mining, indicating the typical organized crime in West Africa.

The enforcement remains uneven, with challenges around cooperation between financial regulators, law enforcement, and courts, as well as issues with corruption and gaps in the regulatory framework. Despite these interventions, Kush remains entrenched, its production adapting faster than regulatory mechanisms can respond. Sierra Leone's experience underscores the urgent need for regional precursor monitoring, cross-border intelligence sharing and investment in public health infrastructure, serving as both a cautionary tale and a blueprint for synthetic drug prevention in Africa.


## Existing Legal Frameworks in Member States Relevant to NPS

Many West African countries are updating their legal systems to better address new psychoactive substances (NPS). Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the African Union (AU Plan of Action on Drug Control) both emphasize harmonized legislation, early warning systems, and precursor chemical control. ECOWAS's Regional Action Plan on Drug Trafficking (2020–2025) encourages Member States to create flexible scheduling mechanisms to address the NPS threat and reform existing laws. For instance, Nigeria has introduced the “National Drug Control Master Plan” that addresses synthetic drugs and expands the national drug schedule to incorporate emerging substances. Ghana passed the Narcotics Control Commission Act (Act 1019 of 2020)

Despite these changes, enforcement often lags due to limited resources and the rapid evolution of synthetic drugs, which can outpace legal controls. Strengthening collaboration between different government agencies and improving the speed with which regulations are adapted are ongoing priorities for the region.

**Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs (1961):** Controls substances like cannabis and opium, allowing use only for medical and scientific purposes. It also established the International Narcotics Control Board (INCB).

**1971 Convention on Psychotropic Substances:** Extends controls to psychotropic drugs like amphetamines and hallucinogens, balancing medical needs with control measures.

**1988 UN Convention Against Illicit Traffic:** Targets drug trafficking, chemical precursors, and money laundering, promoting legal cooperation between countries.

**UNTOC (Palermo Convention):** Focuses on combating organized crime that crosses borders, including drug trafficking, by encouraging cooperation on law enforcement and legal matters.

**INCB and WHO Scheduling:** These bodies work together to scientifically evaluate and list substances for international control, ensuring emerging drugs are regulated.

## Precursor Control Mechanisms and Regional Structures

**ECOWAS Instruments**: GIABA plays a leading role in anti-money laundering efforts, while the West African Epidemiology Network on Drug Use (WENDU) gathers critical data to support policies. Regional gatherings and conventions also discuss precursor surveillance.

**Mano River Union:** Made up of Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Liberia, and Sierra Leone, it works on coordinating peace and security efforts, which include combating drug trafficking.

**African Union:** Through its Division of Social Welfare and Drug Control, the AU guides overall drug policy and plans continent-wide strategies on drug control and prevention.

**West African Law Enforcement and Regional Cooperation Platforms**: West African countries have established multiple platforms to enhance collaboration and coordination among law enforcement agencies, such as:

- **Inter-Agency Task Forces and Joint Operations**: Countries often form transnational task forces that operate across borders, combining intelligence and resources from police, customs, immigration, and military entities. These task forces focus on dismantling trafficking networks, shutting down covert labs etc.

- **Regional Intelligence Sharing Mechanisms:** Information exchange is facilitated through platforms like the ECOWAS Drug Control Coordination Unit and GIABA's intelligence networks to monitor trafficking trends, share operational data in real-time, and coordinate law enforcement responses.

- **INCB Global Rapid Interdiction of Dangerous Substances (GRIDS) Programme:** This program supports member states by coordinating rapid interdiction actions against trafficking of synthetic drugs and precursor chemicals. It organizes training workshops and supports joint investigations to strengthen the capacity of law enforcement agencies.

- **Capacity Building and Technical Assistance:** UNODC and partner agencies offer ongoing training for customs officials, investigators, etc. This improves the overall effectiveness of law enforcement agencies in the region.

## Conclusion

The synthetic drug crisis, highlighted by the rise of Kush in West Africa, poses a combined health and security threat to societies. Addressing it effectively requires a mix of law enforcement efforts, financial investigation improvements, and health-centred responses including prevention and treatment. International drug treaties provide the framework for these efforts, and regional organizations like ECOWAS and the AU offer platforms for cooperation and implementation. Strong political commitment, effective resource allocation and collaboration across sectors are key to protecting at-risk communities and blocking the spread of synthetic drugs.

Delegates are urged to focus their deliberations on a comprehensive and balanced approach that tackles both the *supply* and *demand* dimensions of the crisis. Priority should be given to strengthening early warning and forensic capacities, enabling states to rapidly identify new synthetic substances such as *Kush* and their precursors. At the same time, efforts must be directed toward tightening border controls and maritime blockade, improving financial intelligence, anti–money laundering systems and dismantling the criminal networks driving cross-border trafficking. As representatives of the international community, delegates must aim to create resolutions that promote funding and technical cooperation while reinforcing the collective determination to curb the proliferation of synthetic drugs and protecting the stability of West African societies.

# QUESTIONS A RESOLUTION MUST ANSWER (QARMA)

1. How should Member States and the UN define and classify "synthetic drugs" and "new psychoactive substances" (NPS), especially those not yet listed under the 1961 and 1971 Conventions?
2. What guidelines or mechanisms can ensure timely updates of national schedules in line with UNODC's Early Warning Advisory (EWA) and WHO recommendations?
3. How can Member States standardize data collection and reporting to enable early detection and coordinated responses to emerging substances like Kush?
4. What strategies can detect and dismantle clandestine labs producing synthetic drugs in West Africa
5. How can States improve control over chemical precursors and reagents, particularly those entering through ports, free trade zones, and informal chemical imports?
6. What international cooperation measures can disrupt the transnational chemical supply chains from Asia to Africa?
7. How can existing mechanisms address the intersection between drug trafficking and other organized crimes such as money laundering, arms smuggling, human trafficking, and illicit mining?
8. How should the resolution address the role of non-state criminal networks and corrupt officials in facilitating trafficking?
9. How can Member States strengthen anti–money laundering (AML) and counter–terrorist financing (CTF) mechanisms linked to synthetic drug profits?
10. What measures can ensure affordable access to detoxification and mental health services, especially for youth affected by Kush?