



OFFICIAL STATEMENT

**By H.E. Amb. Minata Samate Cessouma,
Commissioner, Health, Humanitarian Affairs and
Social Development,
African Union Commission**

**on the Commemoration of
The International Day against Drug Abuse and Illicit
Trafficking (World Drug Day)**

26 June 2023

26 June 2023, Addis Ababa : I join the world in commemorating this year's **International Day against Drug Abuse and Illicit Trafficking**, also known as **World Drug Day** under the theme ***“People first: stop stigma and discrimination, strengthen prevention”***, which comes at a time the African continent is at a crossroads because of high drug-related challenges.

Drug use and drug markets transcend all of Africa's five regions. On the one hand, the continent is experiencing a rise in drug trafficking and its related crime and, on the other, rapidly rising consumption of drugs, an exponential growth in the number of drug users, and preventable drug-related and mental health illness, including amongst youth, women and at-risk populations such as those in correctional centers.

Africa is no longer just a transit region for trafficked drugs but a major consumption market. Local consumption and production of certain drugs have been on the rise, with negative impacts on the lives, health and socio-economic well-being of Africans. The continent is gradually emerging as a trafficking and consumption hub for major hard drugs. In addition, synthetic drugs and cannabis are becoming a major challenge in Africa.

Substance Use Disorders (SUDs) take a toll on individuals, families, and communities; cost lives, reduce productivity, and strain families and resources. Drug addiction should be recognised as a public health issue, one urgently requiring trained professionals and corresponding investments in evidence-based prevention, harm reduction and treatment services and infrastructure, and not something that can be resolved solely with punitive policy responses. In this regard, the African Union Commission, acknowledges the engagement of civil society and community groups across the continent in the global **“Support. Don't Punish”** campaign.

HIV and other blood-borne infections, including hepatitis, continue to spread rapidly in Africa among vulnerable and marginalized populations such as people who inject drugs and in prison settings. There is also an emerging crisis of substance use disorders in humanitarian settings, especially in the context of Africa hosting one-third of global forcibly displaced populations due to conflicts, violence and natural disasters. An estimated 32 million Africans are either internally displaced, refugees, or asylum seekers.

Data from the African Union's drug surveillance sentinel - the Pan African Epidemiology Network on Drug Use – show that 70% of people who sought treatment for Substance Use Disorders on the continent in 2019 were aged 15 to 34 years. About 2.3% of those treated were aged 10 to 14 years, while 1 in 8 persons that accessed treatment was a woman.

It is, therefore, imperative to sustain a balanced and comprehensive response to drug challenges in the context of these health and humanitarian crises to protect the right to health of the most vulnerable – as enshrined in the Africa Union's Plan of Action on Drug Control and Crime Prevention (2019-2025). Our priority remains to leave no one behind, even in times of crises.

The Commission will convene a High Level Forum on addressing drug use and substance use disorders amongst youth, women and children in Lusaka, Zambia on 08-10 November 2023. A transformative approach and decisive action is needed now more than ever to place people at the center of national drug control policy responses through concrete investments in the drug control architecture including promoting people's health, through balanced drug control and scaling-up evidence-based services to address the health and social impacts of drug use; reinforcing mechanisms against organised crime; strengthening data collection, research and analysis to generate evidence for judicious review of policy and operational responses; capacity building and credentialing of professionals in drug prevention, treatment and care; dismantling barriers limiting the availability of internationally controlled drugs for medical and scientific purposes; and enhancing the knowledge of policymakers on drug control.

As we commemorate the World Drug Day, let me reiterate that the Commission will work with its member states and international partners to:

- Empower young people and communities to prevent drug use and drug-related harms;
- Increase education about substance use disorders, available treatments, and the importance of early intervention and support;
- Raise awareness about the negative impact of stigma and discrimination on people who use drugs and their families.

- Raise awareness about the HIV and hepatitis epidemics among people who use drugs, and expand and strengthen proven harm reduction programmes;
- Promote evidence-based, voluntary services for all people who use drugs;
- Advocate for alternatives to imprisonment for low-level, non-violent drug-related crimes, such as community-based treatment and services, and Combat stigma and discrimination by promoting language and attitudes that are respectful and non-judgmental.

Together, let's ensure that no one is left behind and do our part to improve health, security and socio-economic well-being of all towards an integrated, prosperous and peaceful Africa.