

The African Union Continental Consultation on Synthetic Drugs
Speech for the opening remarks of Ms. Ashita Mittal, Regional Representative, UNODC ROEA

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Salutations.....

Let me start by thanking the organizers of this meeting and the Government of Madagascar for warmly hosting us. I am very pleased to join you for this consultation on the synthetic drugs problem in the context of the African Continent.

Ladies and gentlemen, according to the world drug report, the number of people using drugs has increased by 20% in the last decade to 292M. Only 1 in 11 of those with substance use disorders has access to treatment, being worse for women where only 1 in 18 have access to treatment. It is a great concern that in Africa, **only 2.8% of those with substance use disorders have access to treatment**. In addition, 13.9Million people inject drugs (1.37Million in Africa), leading to life threatening comorbidities where nearly half of them have Hepatitis C, 1.6 million have HIV and 1.4 million have both HIV and Hepatitis C.

While we have been grappling with traditional drugs, the number of new psychoactive substances emerging on illicit drug markets has increased six-fold in the past decade and reached a record high of more than 1,000 unique substances, frustrating international control efforts.

The threat of synthetic drugs is real and closer to us than ever before. Nearly half of African countries are now reporting non-medical use, seizure and trafficking of tramadol. Increasing seizures of methamphetamines (alongside seizures of heroin) on the southern route,

clandestine laboratories being dismantled in Southern and Western Africa, the increased trafficking and use of synthetic cannabinoids in Northern Africa and Indian ocean islands, are all pointers to the magnitude of the problem.

While the US and Canada are grappling with the opioid epidemic driven by illicit fentanyl, new and more lethal synthetics especially netazenes have already been detected in the US and suspected to be responsible for new waves of overdose cases. With more than 100,000 overdose cases recorded in the US per year, African countries should take lessons and not wait for a widespread synthetic drugs problem to take hold. A widespread opioid epidemic could cripple the public health system, divert scarce development resources and even threaten state survival for many African countries.

Various factors exacerbate the use of opioids. Challenges were amplified by the COVID-19 pandemic and its consequences, as economic hardship and growing inequalities pushed people towards dangerous coping mechanisms, including the use of opioids, especially the cheaper synthetics. The Taliban ban has reduced heroin production by 70%, it is likely that more potent synthetic drugs uptake will increase as people who use drugs resort to alternatives, unless countries rapidly scale up access to substance use treatment programmes. Organized criminal groups exploit instability and challenges related to the rule of law to carry out drug trafficking and other crimes. While large scale manufacture of synthetics is still concentrated in areas affected by governance challenges and instability, political instabilities being witnessed in various parts of the African continent could create conducive environment for exploitation by these organized criminal groups.

Ladies and gentlemen, it is important to note that while more men than women use drugs, and more men than women are involved in drug trafficking, synthetic drugs have narrowed this gender gap and are causing more harm to women. The share of women in non-medical use of pharmaceutical drugs such as sedatives and tranquillizers, pharmaceutical opioids or stimulants, could be substantially higher and, in some cases, nearly equal to those of men. The proportion of women in contact with the criminal justice system for drug possession and trafficking offences is substantially higher for synthetic drugs compared to plant-based drugs.

In response to the rapidly growing problem of Synthetic Drugs, UNODC launched the Synthetic Drugs Strategy in 2021 to support member states in combating this challenge. The strategy is grounded in science and offers a balanced and comprehensive framework, tailored to the needs of specific sub-populations such as youth and women in four main spheres of action namely: *multilateralism and international cooperation, early warning on emerging synthetic drug threats, science-informed health responses, and counternarcotic interventions*. To operationalize the strategy, UNODC further launched the UN toolkit on Synthetic drugs to help the international community in implementing comprehensive responses to counter the global synthetic drugs problem. The toolkit is available in all 6 UN official languages and brings together over 300 practical resources from UN specialized agencies such as WHO, INCB, WCO, UPU, and ICAO and is being used in more than 182 countries globally. I encourage all of us to interact with these resources and put them in use in our respective countries and areas of work.

UNODC in Eastern Africa has been working with member states in the region in promoting the rule of law and human security from various

fronts from strengthening criminal justice responses, addressing corruption and strengthening anti-money laundering, counter-terrorism and disrupting transnational organized crimes, strengthening forensic capabilities and promoting international cooperation, to building capacities and responses against maritime crimes and crimes that affect the environment to strengthening drug use prevention, treatment and care for substance use disorders. Cognizant of the evolving threat of synthetics, UNODC in Eastern Africa, together with our headquarters and with support from the United States INL, embarked on a regional assessment of threat, use and existing capacities to counter the threat of synthetic drugs in 6 Eastern Africa countries. Last week, representatives from Madagascar, Mauritius, Seychelles, Kenya, Uganda and the United Republic of Tanzania met in Nairobi to validate the findings of this assessment, and I am happy that some of them are in attendance. Detailed findings of the assessment will be shared in other sessions of this meeting but allow me to bring to your attention a few **specific points of concern**:

- There is urgent need to increase forensic laboratory capabilities in the region to detect emerging substances in our markets, with linkage to response mechanisms when substances of concern are detected. Without competitive forensic capabilities, we will not understand drug markets and we will not be able to make informed responses.
- Like traditional drugs, trafficking in Synthetics is trans-national. International cooperation in sharing data and intelligence within and between member states needs to be strengthened. Data should also be shared upstream and downstream to keep all actors informed
- Countries in the region need to initiate/ rapidly scale up/improve quality of drug use prevention, substance use disorder treatment programmes and make them more accessible to people in need. While some countries have rolled out substance use treatment

programmes, access for those most in need remains a challenge, while other countries are yet to initiate public health interventions to support those affected by drugs.

- While Naloxone is cheap and safe, drug overdoses continue to claim lives of people who use drugs. Countries need to increase overdose responses by availing naloxone safely at community level and to first responders.
- The need to capacity build frontline law enforcement and border control officials identifying new drugs evident, and the ever evolving concealment methods. The use of submarines and drones to traffic drugs have been reported in some parts of the world.
- Poly drug use, and use of drug mixtures and concoctions going by names such as “kush”, “karkoubi” and “nyaope” “RoRo”, “green paper” is a growing concerns and likely to increase with shortage of heroin in the market. According to the limited evidence available, they often contain a number of harmful substances, including various illicit drugs, pharmaceuticals such as benzodiazepines, alcohol and solvents

Ladies and gentlemen, this is the moment for leaders, policy makers, service providers and communities to come together to take concrete action. This is a unique moment to realize the Africa Agenda 2063 by taking actions that will create “**the Africa we want**”. While drugs are a global challenge, local solutions tailored to specific contexts and dynamics are required, and this meeting couldn’t have come at a better time than now, when our continent is already grappling with synthetic drugs. Taking swift action against the synthetic drugs will not only save lives but prevent drugs from robbing Africa of the anticipated demographic dividend of its young population, save our public system from the high costs of inaction and secure the future for our continent.

Let me **conclude** by stressing once more that UNODC will continue to work with Member states, development partners, civil society, academia and communities in our collective efforts to combat the synthetic drug problem, through balanced and science informed drug approaches such as those highlighted in the UNODC synthetic drug strategy.

Thank you very much for your attention and I wish you fruitful deliberations.