UNODC Statement at the
Economic and Social Council

The development and management of Data and Statistics with the objective of ensuring an empirical basis for policy making in the field of International Drug Control

Data on narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances has been collected since the very first days of multilateral drug control when, following the 1909 Shanghai Opium Commission, in 1912 signatories to the “Hague Convention,” agreed to a system of permits and recording of the manufacture, trade and use of narcotic substances and the periodic reporting of exports and imports of licit narcotic substances. Then, in 1931, under the auspices of the League of Nations, the so-called “Limitation Convention” required each government to furnish annual estimates of its licit narcotic drug needs. The series of international conventions which followed in 1936, 1946, and 1948 culminated in the 1961 “Single Convention.” This, plus the two conventions which followed govern the extended scope of contemporary multilateral drug control. This history forms the rudimentary beginnings of mandated data collection through the Annual Reports Questionnaires, and is surely one of the longer stories of data collection in the present United Nations system.

Today governments are obligated, under the terms of the three international drug control conventions to complete three questionnaires: one on legislative and administrative matters, one on drug abuse and one on the illicit supply of drugs (I have examples of these with me should anyone like to see them, they were most recently revised in 2002). Data gathered through these questionnaires have formed the statistical basis of estimates of the international drug control situation for the last half-decade. Unfortunately, this has never been enough to form a thorough statistical and empirical basis for creating and assessing the efficacy of drug control policy.

I will go into the sources and limitations of our statistical data bases momentarily.

First however, I cannot emphasize strongly enough the importance of this work to the field of international drug control – the objective of all statistical work undertaken at the UNODC is to ensure an empirical basis for making and assessing policy in the field of International Drug Control. It is, of course, hoped that the more robust the statistical assessment of the international drug control situation is, the less influential polemics become. Unfortunately, this field is notoriously difficult to get a handle on from a statistical point of view. The measurements which
are most useful for us, for example the growth or contraction of consumption, trafficking and production are all measurements of activities which are illegal in most cases, and thus “hidden” from a statistical or reporting point of view. Therefore, other indicators must be extrapolated to supplement reports of the actual activities, some of these indirect indicators come from statistics on mortality, morbidity and prices. There is also a problem with reporting capability, which is no doubt shared with most of the colleagues in this room, for this reason UNODC works to strengthen member states capabilities to fulfil their reporting obligations.

Each of these constraints will be discussed in further detail, however, suffice it to say that in this field most statistics are *estimates*, the estimates are used to establish *trends and orders of magnitude*, and these are used to inform policy and programme development.

Now to the numbers themselves.

The oldest and most reliable data set in the drug field is on trafficking: seizures of illicit drugs by enforcement authorities. These numbers have been measured and reported since the international drug control system began early the 20th century. Unfortunately, seizures are the most indirect of indicators from which to estimate production or consumption. They only reveal a partial reality: how much of a particular drug was seized at a particular time. From the number of seizures, we have to extrapolate how much was produced and how much was consumed. In order to do this we make a standard assumption and assume that 90% of total illicit drug production got through to consumers, and only 10% of it was seized. This method, which we still use, was developed during the first half of the last century and unfortunately appears not to be valid any more. For the main drugs (cocaine and heroin) we have seen interception rates (the proportion of total production that is seized) of 30 to 40% over the last 10 to 15 years. Unfortunately, this interception rate is frequently misunderstood. While over long periods of time, like a decade, the trend of seizures – whether they go up or down - does correlate positively with the trend of production and consumption, the interception rate, though often used as such, is not an indicator of law enforcement effectiveness. It is more likely to be an indicator of law enforcement priorities.

Production is our second “hardest” data set but it is full of imponderables, because even if you can measure cultivation you still need to be able to establish (a) yield and in the case of plant based drugs (b) a conversion ratio from natural product to drug. We do, indeed, measure
production and consumption by other means, but the results are not very robust. The production
of the main plant-based drugs, cocaine and heroin, can be estimated by measuring the extent of
coca bush and opium poppy cultivation. This is done by standard agricultural survey methods,
combining land surveys with satellite monitoring. Once the area of cultivation has been
measured, it can be multiplied by a yield factor to give an estimate of the total amount of the drug
produced. The term ‘estimate’ is used because there are many uncertainties in the process. First,
the activity is generally illegal, so peasants or farmers will not divulge the information willingly.
Secondly, once the area has been estimated, the yield must be established. How much opium, for
instance, can be harvested from x number of hectares of opium poppy cultivation? These yields
vary from 10 to 50 kilograms of opium per hectare. Thirdly, a conversion factor has to be
established to estimate how much heroin can be derived from a unit of opium. This is gene rally
assumed to be 1:10, i.e. 1 kilogram of heroin from 10 kilograms of opium, but it also varies and
depends upon where the opium poppy is being cultivated. Similar uncertainties exist when trying
to estimate the total amount of cocaine that can be produced from coca bush cultivation. For
cannabis, we are even further away because we do not even have global estimates of how much
of it grows wild, or how much is cultivated. Measurement is also difficult for synthetic drugs.
Most of them do not have an easily identifiable botanical starting material. They are made from
chemicals, called ‘precursors’ in the trade, which often have a wide range of industrial and
medical uses. Quite apart from the regulatory problem of establishing effective controls over the
illicit use of substances with so many legitimate uses, there is also a considerable measurement
problem. It is hard to establish how much of a particular chemical is diverted for the manufacture
of an illicit drug, particularly when the total production volume of the chemical is so large, and
the amount diverted so small. Even if we know the amount of precursors seized, or prevented
from diversion into illicit channels, we still have the extrapolation problem noted above for the
plant-based drugs.

Having established the seizure and production totals, one enters the most difficult terrain:
estimating the number of users. This highlights the importance of the epidemiologist and the
survey researcher, whose work is used more and more to try and estimate the numbers of people
who use drugs, the incidence and the prevalence of drug abuse. This is harder than it sounds for
the obvious reason that since the activity is generally illegal, it is in the interests of the user to
conceal rather than reveal it. Complex methods of measurement, ranging from surveys of
invisible populations to cross-checking registry data from hospitals, treatment centres, police
stations and courts of law, have consequently been developed. The measures are all imperfect,
and most suffer from the problem of comparability, because the phenomena (an arrest, a hospital emergency room episode) are so different. After much methodological juggling, however, it is possible to arrive at an estimate of the number of drug users. Then it becomes a matter of triangulating the three numbers: the estimates of production, trafficking and consumption.

At UNODC, we are researchers trying to establish an evidence base for policy; we have come some way toward fulfilling our operational priorities as far as statistics are concerned. The United Nations General Assembly Special Session on Drugs (1998) asked for reliable data to measure the situation, establish a baseline in order to establish a benchmark against which targets can be measured – our response to that was to develop the International Crop Monitoring Programme (now yielding concrete data) and the Global Assessment Programme (working to build capacity), both of which have gone some way to improving our collection capabilities. Also, as you know our organization has now been restructured in such a way that data issues are being worked on together – therefore, for future commissions we would request our agenda item to be referred to as “drugs and crime statistics.” We still have great need of quality statistics, statistical refinement, and statistical training – and this is where UNODC will look to the Statistical Commission for support UNODC’s continuing efforts to produce high-quality empirical information on drug and crime issues. We hope that some concrete areas for collaboration and cooperation can be defined in the near future.

Thank you very much.