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Opinion Article

Received:
January 12, 2026

Accepted:
February 27, 2026

Published:
August 07, 2026

REGIONAL CONGRESS: STRATEGIES AGAINST MANUFACTURING AND TRAFFICKING SYNTHETIC DRUGS AND NEW PSYCHOACTIVE SUBSTANCES

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Discussion

Overall, drugs have a long history of use and have found utility from traditional and cultural aspects to more therapeutic purposes. However, the rise in the identification of illicit use led to the need of adopting the "Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs / 1961, as amended by the 1972 Protocol" (UN, 1961) and the "Convention on Psychotropic Substances of 1971" (UN, 1971), with the aim of establishing international regulations that would permit the use of substances classified as narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances, for the manufacture of controlled medicines intended solely for medical and scientific purposes. However, the restrictions on their use, stated in the aforementioned conventions, also led to a significant increase in drug trafficking and illicit manufacturing.

This difficulty came to light in the 1970s and 1980s and led to the adoption of the "United Nations Convention against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances / 1988" (UN, 1988), which is focused on the regulation of substances not classified as drugs, but that are used as raw material for illicit manufacturing; specially those classified as psychotropic substances, among them, in their natural state, marijuana (*Cannabis sativa*) and natural extracts like cocaine, from the coca plant (*Erythroxylum coca*), which are particularly produced in large quantities in South America.

Keywords: synthetic drugs, new psychoactive substances, regional cooperation, chemical precursors

In this context, succeeding the adoption of the convention in 1988, it became necessary to update the regulations at a regional level in the Americas. Starting in 1989, the Inter-American Drug Abuse Control Commission of the Organization of American States (CICAD/OAS) developed the "CICAD Model Regulation for the Control of Chemicals Used in the Illicit Manufacture of Narcotic and Psychotropic Substances" (CICAD and OAS, 1989). It has been updated twice, with the most recent version being 2019. While this regulation has allowed to improve the control and enforcement of chemicals, it is important to note that regulatory tightening does not always solve the problem, as illicit organizations often have more resources than regulatory authorities, making it difficult to fight drug trafficking and illegal manufacturing.

The joint work between the authorities from different countries, supported by international organs such as the United Nations (UN) through the United Nations

Office against Drug and Crime (UNODC), and OAS via CICAD, have reinforced technical capabilities of staff in charge of drug control and regulation, especially in the identification of new psychoactive substances (NPS), which behavior is highly dynamic due to the constant innovation of criminal groups.

Expert meetings organized by different countries in coordination with the Inter-American Drug Abuse Control Commission (CICAD) have been highly valuable, as these forums provide opportunities to exchange experiences and practical knowledge gained in combating illicit drugs. To facilitate the exchange of experiences among Latin American experts, identify best practices for the regulation of chemical precursors, and strengthen regional cooperation to address the challenges posed by synthetic drugs and new psychoactive substances (NPS). The Regional Congress: Strategies Against the Manufacture and Trafficking of Synthetic Drugs and New Psychoactive Substances was held in Santo

Domingo, Dominican Republic, in July 2025 (CICAD/OAS, 2025).

In this workshop, experiences were shared regarding the international fight against illicit trade, smuggling, and the diversion of chemical precursors. These substances are widely used in legitimate industrial processes, such as the manufacture of medicines, solvents, food industry products, and industrial automobile maintenance, among others; with particular emphasis on precursors that, because of their chemical properties, can be diverted for the illicit manufacturing of drugs.

Since the 1970s, Latin America has faced significant growth in the production of natural drugs, such as cocaine and marijuana, as well as an increase in the manufacturing of synthetic drugs, including amphetamines and, more recently, highly dangerous synthetic opioids like fentanyl.

The event featured the participation of experts from multiple countries, including Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Spain, Uruguay, and the United States. It also included representatives from international organizations such as CICAD/OAS, the Cooperation Programme between Latin America, the Caribbean and the European Union, on Drug Policies (COPOLAD), the International Narcotics Control Board (INCB), the World Customs Organization (WCO), UNODC, and the Universal Postal Union (UPU) (CICAD and OAS, 2025).

The Dominican Republic, as the host country, shared its drug control experiences; it has an effective legal framework regarding the classification and illicit use of substances, as well as the penalties applied for misuse or smuggling (Law No. 50-88, Law on Drugs and Controlled Substances of the Dominican Republic, Articles 3-5). This is a comprehensive piece of legislation that allows for the application of strict controls, and the effective combat of drug trafficking (Government of the Dominican Republic, 1988).

Highly interesting topics were addressed regarding the evolution of the market for synthetic drugs and NPS (New Psychoactive Substances), the control of chemical precursors, and the dismantling of clandestine laboratories; as well as fentanyl and other dangerous synthetic opioids. Other relevant subjects discussed included: the detection of new substances (the role of forensic analysis both in the laboratory and on the field), investigating the sale of synthetic drugs over the internet, drug trafficking

via air routes, the detection and control of synthetic drugs at customs checkpoints, trafficking of synthetic drugs through mail services, and strategies for the effective regulation of synthetic drugs and NPS.

The experience shared by Argentina is outstanding (Government of the Republic of Argentina, 2006), especially the application of the regulation that allows them to conduct Airport Security checks (Airport Security Law 26.102, Chapter 4). This provides them with a strong legal framework for air and maritime controls, which has enabled the seizure of illicit shipments related to drug trafficking.

Similarly, representatives from the Investigation Police (PDI) of Chile (Government of Chile, 2005; Government of Chile, 2007) shared their experiences regarding the application of a regulatory framework for substances and drugs in their country (Law No. 20,000, Article 3, Sanctions for Drug Trafficking). This framework enables them to carry out effective controls in the fight against drug trafficking.

For its part, the representative from Colombia shared experiences regarding the seizure of precursors included in the latest regulatory update, which unifies and updates the control of substances and chemical products (Resolution No. 00004/ National Council on Narcotics, 2022).

The workshop highlighted the current trend toward increased production of synthetic drugs compared to the production of drugs of natural origin. To address this, various situations and conditions were analyzed, according to the parameters set out in Table 1.

Table 1. Natural vs. synthetic: two drug manufacturing models

Natural drugs	Sinthetic drugs
Extracted from plants	Manufactured using chemical precursors
Cultivation and precursors are required	Cultivation is not required
Large land areas are required	Production in limited spaces
Production may take months	Rapid manufacturing (hours or days)
Trafficking involves large volumes	Can be manufactured near the market

Source: Maestre-D, (2025, July 15–17). Workshop presentation: Strategies against the manufacturing and trafficking of synthetic drugs and new psychoactive substances. Regional Congress, Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic.

Based on the above, cooperation through international forums featuring regional experts is essential for strengthening regulatory efforts. These spaces allow a more effective response to the challenges posed by the control and combat of illicit drug manufacturing and smuggling. The experiences gained in these forums enhance the technical knowledge required to better confront the drug problem—a situation that, in many cases, triggers an increase in violence among traffickers, as they fight for territories to expand their market reach.

The workshop results confirm the relevance of these initiatives in strengthening collaboration between various regional authorities. Furthermore, these spaces promote information sharing among experts, which broadens and solidifies opportunities for cooperation in the fight against drugs.

Having access to timely information is fundamental to robust regulatory work, and more effectively face the challenges associated with control and combat, of illicit manufacturing and trafficking. In this sense, hosting international forums with the participation of regional specialists contributes significantly to the joint analysis of the issue, and the identification of coordinated strategies.

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