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United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime

Background Guide

Agenda

“Preventing the diversion of precursor chemicals into illicit drug manufacturing”.

Letter from the Executive Board

Dear Delegates,

It is our pleasure to welcome you to the committee.For many of you, this may be your first MUN or your first experience in the UNODC. Do not let unfamiliar terminology, procedure, or the complexity of the agenda intimidate you. Every experienced delegate was once a first-timer. Use this committee as an opportunity to learn, participate, and challenge yourself.

When beginning your research, understand the problem before trying to solve it. Start with the basics of precursor chemicals, diversion, and illicit drug manufacturing. Then move towards your country's position, domestic policies, international commitments, and previous actions on the issue.

We strongly encourage you to use primary and credible sources, particularly UNODC publications, UN documents, INCB reports, treaties, resolutions, and official government sources. Good research is not about knowing everything; it is about knowing what is reliable.

AI can be a useful research tool. Use it to simplify complex concepts, generate research questions, organise information, and identify areas worth exploring. However, verify every important fact, statistic, treaty provision, and citation through the original source. Let AI assist your research, not replace it.

Most importantly, do not be afraid to speak, ask questions, negotiate, or make mistakes. We value substance, preparation, curiosity, and meaningful participation over simply speaking the most.

Come prepared, stay curious, and make the most of your committee experience.We look forward to seeing you in committee.

Godspeed
The Executive Board
United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC)

Introduction to the Agenda

What are precursor chemicals?

Precursor chemicals are substances that are used to manufacture, process, or produce other substances, including certain controlled drugs. Many precursor chemicals have completely legitimate uses in industries such as pharmaceuticals, agriculture, cosmetics, manufacturing, and scientific research. For example, chemicals used in the production of medicines may also be used in the illegal production of certain drugs. This dual-use nature makes precursor chemicals particularly difficult to regulate: governments must prevent their misuse without unnecessarily restricting legitimate trade and industrial activity.

What does “diversion” mean?

In the context of drug control, diversion refers to the movement of a legally produced or legally obtained chemical from its legitimate supply chain into an illicit one. A chemical may initially be manufactured, purchased, and transported legally, but later be redirected towards illegal drug production. Diversion can occur through methods such as falsified documents, fraudulent companies, suspicious orders, theft, smuggling, or misuse of legitimate business networks. Therefore, diversion does not necessarily begin with an illegal chemical transaction; it can begin within an otherwise legitimate supply chain.

What is illicit drug manufacturing?

Illicit drug manufacturing refers to the illegal production, preparation, processing, or synthesis of controlled narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances. Unlike legitimate pharmaceutical or chemical manufacturing, illicit production takes place outside authorised regulatory and safety frameworks. It may involve organised criminal groups obtaining precursor chemicals, equipment, and technical knowledge and using them to manufacture drugs for illegal distribution. The increasing availability of synthetic drugs has made precursor chemicals particularly important because many synthetic substances require specific

chemical inputs during their production.

Why is the diversion of chemicals a problem?

The diversion of precursor chemicals can facilitate the production and distribution of illicit drugs across borders. This creates challenges for public health, law enforcement, customs authorities, and governments. Unlike finished drugs, precursor chemicals often have legitimate commercial purposes and are therefore traded openly through international supply chains. This makes it difficult for authorities to identify which transactions are legitimate and which may eventually contribute to illicit manufacturing. The rapid emergence of new synthetic drugs also creates an additional challenge, as criminals may shift towards alternative chemicals or substances that are not yet subject to the same controls.

How does legitimate chemical trade become connected to illegal drug production?

The global chemical trade involves manufacturers, wholesalers, distributors, brokers, shipping companies, customs authorities, and end-users. A chemical can pass through several stages before reaching its final destination. Most of these transactions are legitimate; however, weaknesses at any stage can create opportunities for diversion. For example, an illicit actor may falsely identify the intended use of a chemical, establish a company to appear legitimate, manipulate shipping documents, or obtain chemicals through an intermediary. The diverted chemical can then enter an illegal production network.

This makes the issue fundamentally different from simply stopping the trafficking of finished drugs. The objective is to identify and prevent suspicious diversion while allowing legitimate chemical commerce to continue. Effective prevention therefore requires cooperation between governments, customs and law-enforcement agencies, chemical and pharmaceutical industries, transport companies, and international organisations.





Understanding Precursor Chemicals

Precursor chemicals are substances that can be used in the manufacture of controlled narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances. They are not necessarily illegal substances themselves. In fact, many precursor chemicals are produced and traded legally because they have important applications in industries such as pharmaceuticals, agriculture, manufacturing, research, and chemical processing. Their importance to drug control arises from the fact that the same chemical that has a legitimate industrial purpose can, under different circumstances, become an input into illicit drug production.

It is important to distinguish precursor chemicals, essential chemicals, and pharmaceutical substances. Precursor chemicals are substances that can be incorporated into, or used to produce, a controlled drug during its manufacture. Essential chemicals, by contrast, are generally chemicals that may be used in the manufacturing or processing of drugs but are not necessarily incorporated into the final drug itself. The distinction can depend on the particular drug and manufacturing process. Pharmaceutical substances are substances used in the legitimate production of medicines and pharmaceutical products. Some pharmaceutical substances may also be controlled or may serve as precursors, but the terms are not interchangeable.

Several chemicals are internationally recognised as important precursors. Examples include ephedrine and pseudoephedrine, which can be associated with the illicit manufacture of methamphetamine, and safrole-rich oils and 3,4-MDP-2-P, which can be associated with the manufacture of MDMA. Acetic anhydride is another important controlled chemical because it can be used in the illicit manufacture of heroin. These examples demonstrate why chemical control is complicated: the chemicals themselves can have legitimate commercial uses and may be traded across international borders for entirely lawful purposes.

➢ **Why are precursor chemicals legally produced and traded?**

Because many of these chemicals have legitimate industrial, pharmaceutical, agricultural, or scientific applications. Governments therefore cannot simply prohibit their production or international trade. Instead, states generally seek to

regulate their manufacture, sale, transportation, import, and export while allowing legitimate industries to operate.

➢ **Why do criminals need precursor chemicals?**
Because many illicit drugs, particularly synthetic drugs, require specific chemical inputs during their production. Criminal networks therefore attempt to obtain precursor chemicals through legitimate supply chains, fraudulent transactions, smuggling, theft, or intermediaries. Preventing this movement before chemicals reach illicit manufacturers can therefore disrupt drug production at an earlier stage.

➢ **What makes precursor chemicals particularly difficult to control?**
How can governments distinguish legitimate chemical commerce from suspicious transactions?

By combining licensing, documentation, end-user verification, shipment monitoring, suspicious-order reporting, customs controls, and information-sharing between relevant authorities.

Precursor chemicals are substances that can be used in the manufacture or processing of controlled narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances. Importantly, a precursor chemical is not necessarily an illegal substance. Many of these chemicals are manufactured, purchased, transported, and used lawfully across the world. They play important roles in industries such as pharmaceuticals, agriculture, manufacturing, cosmetics, scientific research, and chemical processing. The central challenge for drug-control authorities is therefore not to eliminate these chemicals from international trade, but to prevent them from being diverted from legitimate uses into illicit drug production.

Precursor chemicals should also be distinguished from essential chemicals and pharmaceutical substances. Precursor chemicals are substances that can be used in the manufacture of a controlled drug and may become part of the chemical process that produces it. Essential chemicals, on the other hand, may be used during the manufacture or processing of a drug without necessarily becoming part of the final substance. Pharmaceutical substances are materials used in the legitimate manufacture of medicines and other pharmaceutical products. There can be overlap between these categories, meaning that a substance may have legitimate pharmaceutical uses while also being subject to precursor-control measures.

A particularly important concept is the dual-use nature of precursor chemicals. A chemical may be completely legitimate when purchased by a pharmaceutical company, university laboratory, or manufacturing facility, yet the same substance could be obtained by an illicit network and used to manufacture controlled drugs. Commonly discussed examples include ephedrine and pseudoephedrine, which can be used in the illicit manufacture of methamphetamine, 3,4-MDP-2-P and safrole-rich oils, which can be associated with the manufacture of MDMA, and acetic anhydride, which can be used in the illicit manufacture of heroin. The existence of legitimate uses means that governments must carefully balance effective control with the continuation of lawful commerce.







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The Link Between Precursor Chemicals and Illicit Drugs

How Precursor Chemicals Contribute to the Production of Drugs

Precursor chemicals are substances that can be used in the chemical manufacture of controlled drugs. They may not themselves be drugs, and many have legitimate applications in pharmaceuticals, agriculture, laboratories, manufacturing and other industries. However, certain precursor chemicals can be chemically transformed into controlled substances and therefore become an important point of intervention in preventing illicit drug production. Their significance lies in the fact that illicit manufacturers require access to particular chemical inputs to produce many synthetic drugs. If these inputs can be identified, monitored and prevented from being diverted from legitimate commerce, authorities can disrupt illicit manufacturing before the final drug reaches consumers. This is why international drug-control frameworks place considerable emphasis on monitoring precursor chemicals alongside controlling finished narcotic and psychotropic substances.

A useful distinction is between synthetic drugs and plant-based drugs. Plant-based drugs are derived directly or through relatively limited processing from naturally occurring plants or plant materials. Examples include cocaine, which originates from the coca plant, and heroin, which is manufactured from morphine obtained from opium poppies. Cannabis is another example of a drug that can be produced directly from the cannabis plant. Synthetic drugs, by contrast, are produced primarily through chemical processes in which precursor substances and other chemical inputs are transformed into a final psychoactive substance. Methamphetamine, MDMA, fentanyl and several other synthetic opioids fall within this broad category. The distinction is important for drug-control policy because the production of synthetic drugs does not necessarily depend upon the cultivation, harvesting and geographical concentration of a particular plant. Instead, it depends substantially upon access to chemicals, equipment, technical knowledge and suitable production facilities.

Synthetic drugs create particular challenges for governments and law-

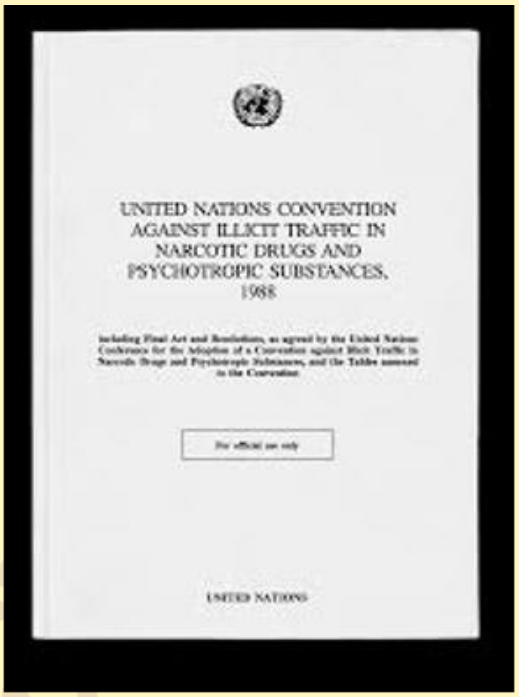
enforcement agencies because their production can be adaptable and geographically dispersed. Unlike plant-based drugs, which generally require the cultivation of specific crops and therefore involve identifiable agricultural supply chains, synthetic drugs can potentially be manufactured wherever the necessary chemicals, equipment and expertise are available. Criminal organisations may also alter manufacturing processes or substitute one chemical input for another when particular substances become more difficult to obtain. The emergence of new psychoactive substances further complicates regulation because illicit manufacturers can modify existing chemical structures to create substances that may not immediately fall within established legal classifications. This creates a continuing challenge for regulators attempting to balance effective control with legitimate scientific and industrial use. At the same time, the relatively small quantities of some precursor chemicals required for particular production processes can make detection more difficult when compared with large-scale shipments of finished drugs.

Methamphetamine illustrates the importance of precursor control. It is a powerful synthetic stimulant whose illicit manufacture requires chemical precursors and other specialised inputs. The international diversion of such chemicals has therefore become an important area of drug-control cooperation. MDMA, commonly associated with the recreational drug ecstasy, is another synthetic substance whose manufacture depends upon chemical precursors that have legitimate uses outside illicit drug production. Controlling the availability and movement of these precursor substances can therefore help disrupt the supply chain used for illicit MDMA manufacture. Fentanyl presents an especially significant challenge because it is an extremely potent synthetic opioid with legitimate medical applications but is also associated with illicitly manufactured fentanyl. Its production involves specific precursor chemicals and chemical intermediates, making monitoring of the relevant supply chains an important component of efforts to prevent illicit manufacture. Other synthetic opioids similarly demonstrate how criminal networks can exploit chemical supply chains to manufacture substances that may be significantly different from traditional plant-derived opioids. Some newly emerging synthetic opioids can also appear rapidly in illicit markets, creating regulatory and enforcement challenges.

Controlling precursor chemicals is therefore fundamentally different from simply controlling finished drugs. A finished drug is generally subject to direct prohibition, licensing or other forms of regulatory control because its intended use and legal status can be more readily identified. Precursor chemicals, however, often have extensive legitimate commercial applications. The same chemical that can be

diverted for illicit drug production may also be essential for producing medicines, plastics, paints, agricultural products, laboratory materials or other lawful goods. A blanket prohibition would consequently interfere with legitimate industries and scientific research. Effective precursor control instead focuses on monitoring and regulating legitimate commerce. This can include licensing manufacturers and distributors, maintaining transaction and shipment records, verifying end-users, monitoring unusual orders, conducting customs checks and requiring businesses to report suspicious transactions. International cooperation is particularly important because precursor chemicals may be manufactured in one country, legally traded through another and ultimately diverted somewhere else for illicit production. The central challenge is therefore not to eliminate access to useful chemicals, but to prevent their diversion while preserving legitimate international trade and industrial activity. In this sense, precursor control functions as a preventive layer of drug control: rather than focusing exclusively on the final illicit substance, it seeks to identify and disrupt the supply chain that makes its manufacture possible.

International Legal Framework Governing Precursor Chemicals

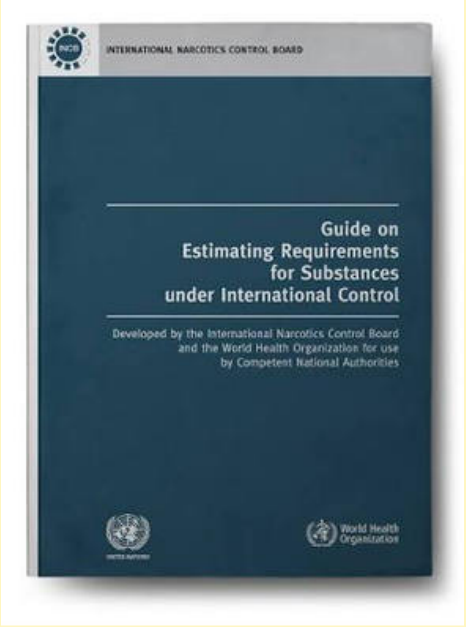

UNITED NATIONS CONVENTION AGAINST ILLICIT TRAFFIC IN NARCOTIC DRUGS AND PSYCHOTROPIC SUBSTANCES, 1988

UNITED NATIONS

The international control of narcotic drugs, psychotropic substances and the chemicals used in their illicit manufacture is primarily based on three major United Nations conventions: the 1961 Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs, the 1971 Convention on Psychotropic Substances, and the 1988 United Nations Convention against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances. Together, these instruments establish the principal international framework for controlling drugs, preventing their illicit manufacture and trafficking, and promoting cooperation between States. The 1961 Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs consolidated earlier international drug-control agreements and established a system for limiting the production, manufacture, trade and possession of narcotic drugs to medical and scientific purposes, while placing substances such as opium, morphine, heroin and cannabis under international control. The Convention also created mechanisms for international monitoring through the International Narcotics Control Board (INCB). Its primary focus is therefore on narcotic drugs themselves, rather than on the broader chemical supply chains that may be used to manufacture them.

The 1971 Convention on Psychotropic Substances expanded the international control system to substances that were not adequately covered by the 1961 framework, particularly synthetic and pharmaceutical substances with psychoactive effects. It established different levels of control depending on the substance's medical value and potential for abuse, covering substances such as amphetamine-type stimulants, barbiturates, benzodiazepines and hallucinogens. Like the 1961 Convention, the 1971 Convention seeks to ensure that controlled psychotropic substances remain available for legitimate medical and scientific purposes while preventing their misuse and illicit distribution. However, the rapid development of illicit synthetic-drug manufacturing demonstrated that controlling finished substances alone was insufficient. Criminal organisations could obtain or

divert legitimate chemicals and use them to manufacture controlled substances outside the regulated pharmaceutical system.



This gap was addressed more directly by the 1988 United Nations Convention against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances. The Convention was adopted in response to the increasingly international and organised nature of drug trafficking and strengthened cooperation against illicit production, trafficking and related activities. It is particularly significant for precursor chemicals because Article 12 specifically addresses substances frequently used in the illicit manufacture of narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances. Rather than treating chemical inputs merely as ordinary commercial goods, the Convention establishes an international framework for preventing their diversion into illicit manufacture. It provides for measures concerning substances listed in its Tables I and II, including controls over their manufacture and distribution, monitoring of international trade, cooperation between competent authorities and the reporting of suspicious transactions. It also provides mechanisms through which substances can be added to or removed from the control tables as patterns of illicit manufacture change. This flexibility is particularly important because illicit drug manufacturers can adapt their methods and seek alternative chemical inputs when particular substances become difficult to obtain.

The 1988 Convention is therefore particularly important to precursor-chemical control because it recognises that disrupting illicit drug production requires attention not only to the finished drug but also to the materials necessary to manufacture it. Article 12 requires States Parties to take appropriate measures to monitor the manufacture and distribution of substances listed in the relevant tables and to prevent their diversion. It also encourages cooperation between States and with manufacturers, distributors, commercial establishments and professional bodies. The Convention further provides for international cooperation in situations where precursor chemicals are suspected of being diverted for illicit purposes. This creates a preventive approach: authorities can intervene at an earlier stage of the supply chain rather than waiting until an illicit drug has already been manufactured and trafficked.

International cooperation is essential because precursor-chemical diversion

frequently involves multiple jurisdictions. A chemical may be manufactured in one country, sold by a company in another, transported through a third State and ultimately diverted for illicit manufacture elsewhere. No single State can therefore effectively monitor the entire supply chain on its own. The 1988 Convention facilitates cooperation through mechanisms including the exchange of information, assistance between competent authorities, cooperation in investigations and monitoring of international transactions. The International Narcotics Control Board (INCB) plays an important role in supporting the international precursor-control system by collecting information, facilitating communication between national authorities and promoting implementation of the relevant international control measures. Systems such as the INCB's Pre-Export Notification (PEN) Online mechanism allow authorities in exporting and importing States to exchange information concerning international shipments of controlled precursor chemicals. Such cooperation helps authorities verify legitimate end-users, identify suspicious transactions and respond to possible diversion while preserving legitimate international trade. Ultimately, the three conventions operate as complementary components of the international drug-control framework, with the 1961 and 1971 conventions principally establishing controls over narcotic and psychotropic substances, while the 1988 Convention provides the more direct international legal basis for addressing the illicit manufacture, trafficking and diversion of precursor chemicals,

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How Diversion Happens and the Role of Technology

❖Legal Supply Chain → Point of Diversion → Illegal Use

The movement of precursor chemicals can be understood through a simple chain: legal supply chain → point of diversion → illegal use. Most precursor chemicals begin their journey through legitimate commercial activity and are produced, sold and transported for lawful purposes. The challenge for authorities is to identify the point at which a legitimate chemical is redirected towards illicit drug manufacturing.

A. Manufacturing: The process generally begins with a chemical producer that manufactures or supplies a precursor chemical for legitimate industrial, pharmaceutical, agricultural or scientific purposes. At this stage, manufacturers may be required to maintain records of production, buyers and quantities and comply with national licensing and reporting requirements. Proper documentation and knowledge of the intended end-user can help authorities distinguish legitimate demand from transactions that may present diversion risks.

B. Distribution: After production, chemicals may pass through wholesalers, traders and brokers before reaching their final legitimate customer. These intermediaries can be useful in international commerce but may also make the supply chain more complex because the original manufacturer may not have direct contact with the eventual end-user. Weak verification of buyers, unusual purchasing patterns or inaccurate documentation can create opportunities for diversion.

C. Transportation: Chemicals are then transported through ports, airports, land borders and postal or courier systems. International shipments may pass through several jurisdictions before reaching their declared destination. Customs authorities therefore play an important role in checking documentation, identifying inconsistencies and assessing whether shipments correspond with the declared importer and intended use. Postal and courier networks can also present challenges because they handle large numbers of legitimate shipments.

D. Diversion: The point of diversion occurs when a chemical is redirected from its

legitimate destination towards an unauthorised or illegal use. This may involve fraudulent transactions, where false information is provided about the buyer or intended use; suspicious orders, involving unusual quantities or purchasing patterns; theft, in which chemicals are unlawfully removed from legitimate facilities or shipments; or smuggling, where chemicals are deliberately moved across borders outside established regulatory controls. Diversion can therefore occur through both criminal activity and exploitation of weaknesses in otherwise legitimate commercial systems.

E. Illicit Manufacturing: Once diverted, the chemical may ultimately reach illegal drug producers, where it can be used alongside other chemical inputs and equipment to manufacture controlled substances. At this stage, the original legitimate supply chain has been transformed into an illicit supply route. Preventing diversion therefore requires intervention throughout the chain rather than relying exclusively on law-enforcement action after illegal drugs have already been manufactured.

❖Technology and Monitoring in Preventing Diversion

Modern technology has become increasingly important in detecting and preventing the diversion of precursor chemicals. Electronic tracking of chemical shipments allows authorities and businesses to maintain digital records of shipments from their origin to their declared destination. Such systems can make it easier to identify missing consignments, unexpected changes in routes or discrepancies between shipping information and actual movements. Digital customs systems similarly allow customs authorities to process large volumes of import and export information electronically and compare declarations against existing records. This can improve the speed and consistency with which potentially problematic shipments are identified.

Data analysis can assist authorities in identifying patterns that may not be obvious when individual transactions are examined separately. For example, repeated purchases by connected companies, unusual changes in order volumes or transactions involving high-risk routes may justify additional scrutiny. This contributes to risk-based inspections, under which customs and law-enforcement authorities concentrate limited resources on shipments presenting greater indicators of risk rather than physically inspecting every shipment. Monitoring suspicious transactions is another important safeguard, particularly where manufacturers, distributors and other businesses are required to report transactions that appear inconsistent with legitimate commercial activity.

International information-sharing platforms further strengthen these measures by allowing competent authorities in different countries to exchange information concerning suspicious shipments, companies, end-users and diversion attempts. Such cooperation is particularly important because precursor chemicals can cross several jurisdictions before reaching their final destination. However, technology also creates new challenges. Encrypted communication and online marketplaces can make it more difficult for authorities to identify relationships between suppliers and illicit buyers, while online platforms can allow individuals to communicate and conduct transactions across borders with limited face-to-face contact. Effective precursor control therefore increasingly requires a combination of digital monitoring, trained personnel, international information-sharing and traditional customs and law-enforcement measures.

Role of Key International Organisations and Case Studies, Legal Provisions and Relevant Examples

❖Role of Key International Organisations

The prevention of precursor-chemical diversion requires several organisations because the problem crosses drug policy, customs, policing, public health and international trade. Each organisation has a different function, and their roles are generally complementary rather than interchangeable.

UNODC (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime) provides international policy support, research, technical assistance and capacity-building to States dealing with illicit drugs and transnational organised crime. In the context of precursor chemicals, UNODC assists governments in developing legislation, strengthening law-enforcement and customs capacity, improving data collection and implementing international drug-control standards. It also helps countries cooperate across borders and provides research on emerging patterns of synthetic-drug manufacture and chemical diversion.

INCB (International Narcotics Control Board) has a particularly important role in precursor control. It monitors how States implement the international drug-control conventions and works specifically to prevent the diversion of chemicals used in illicit drug manufacture. INCB monitors international precursor trade, supports suspicious-transaction investigations and operates systems such as PEN Online, through which exporting and importing authorities can exchange information about planned shipments. It also maintains the international precursor-control framework and assesses whether additional substances may need to be placed under control.
WCO (World Customs Organization) focuses on the customs and border-control dimension. Its Drugs and Precursors Programme supports customs administrations in detecting illicit shipments, exchanging seizure information, using risk-management techniques and improving enforcement at borders. This is important because ports, airports and land borders are often the points at which diverted chemicals can be detected before they reach illicit manufacturers.

INTERPOL connects national police and law-enforcement authorities. It supports international investigations, intelligence-sharing, operational coordination and

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INTERPOL connects national police and law-enforcement authorities. It supports international investigations, intelligence-sharing, operational coordination and

training against drug-trafficking networks. Its role becomes particularly important when a precursor diversion case involves criminal organisations operating across several countries, because police authorities in different jurisdictions may each possess only part of the relevant information.

WHO (World Health Organization) contributes primarily through its medical and scientific expertise. Its Expert Committee on Drug Dependence evaluates psychoactive substances for possible international control by examining factors such as therapeutic usefulness, dependence potential and public-health risks. WHO does not have the formal precursor-control role assigned to INCB under the 1988 Convention; its principal relevance is ensuring that international drug-control decisions are informed by scientific and health evidence.

Finally, national authorities implement these international standards domestically. Customs authorities monitor imports and exports, police investigate criminal networks, specialised drug-control agencies regulate controlled substances, and chemical or pharmaceutical regulators oversee legitimate chemical businesses. Their effectiveness depends heavily on coordination between agencies and information-sharing with international partners. The overall system therefore works as a chain: **international organisations establish standards and facilitate cooperation, while national authorities carry out regulation, monitoring, investigation and enforcement on the ground.**

❖ Case Studies, Legal Provisions and Relevant Examples

1. Article 12 of the 1988 UN Convention

The most important legal provision for this agenda is Article 12 of the United Nations Convention against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances, 1988. Article 12 specifically deals with substances frequently used in the illicit manufacture of narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances. It requires States to take appropriate measures to prevent the diversion of substances listed in Table I and Table II and to cooperate with one another for this purpose.

In simple terms, Article 12 recognises that stopping the finished drug is not enough. Governments must also monitor the chemicals that can be used to manufacture it. The provision also allows substances to be added to or removed from the international control tables as new information becomes available. This is important because traffickers can change the chemicals they use when existing precursors

become more difficult to obtain.

For a committee, Article 12 can therefore be used to support proposals involving licensing systems, monitoring of chemical trade, suspicious-transaction reporting, international information-sharing and pre-export notifications.

2. INCB's PEN Online System

A practical example of Article 12 being implemented is the Pre-Export Notification (PEN) Online system developed by INCB. Before certain internationally controlled precursor chemicals are exported, the exporting country's competent authority can notify the importing country's authority of the proposed shipment. This gives the importing State an opportunity to check whether the importer and intended transaction are legitimate.

The importance of this system is that it attempts to stop diversion before the chemical reaches its destination. Instead of waiting for customs or police to discover that a chemical has already been diverted, authorities can examine the transaction in advance. INCB reports that pre-export notification has helped identify numerous diversion attempts.

A related development is PEN Online Light, introduced for voluntary notifications concerning certain non-scheduled chemicals. This responds to a major weakness in traditional precursor control: traffickers may shift towards chemicals that are not yet internationally scheduled.

3. Fentanyl Precursors: Adapting to Changing Methods

The international control of fentanyl precursors provides a clear example of why precursor regulation must continuously evolve. In 2017, two important fentanyl precursors, NPP and ANPP, were placed under international control. Traffickers subsequently adapted by using alternative precursor chemicals. In 2022, the Commission on Narcotic Drugs added norfentanyl, 4-AP and 1-boc-4-AP to Table I of the 1988 Convention.

The basic lesson is simple: controlling one chemical does not necessarily end illicit manufacturing. If alternative chemical inputs remain available, criminal networks may adapt. Therefore, States need mechanisms for identifying emerging chemicals and rapidly sharing information about them.

For a MUN resolution, this can support proposals for early-warning systems, regular review of precursor lists, information-sharing between chemical regulators

and law-enforcement agencies, and cooperation with legitimate chemical industries.

4. Southeast Asia and the Diversion of Methamphetamine Precursors

UNODC's 2025 regional precursor-mapping report provides another useful example. It identified ephedrine and pseudoephedrine as important precursors associated with methamphetamine production in Myanmar's Shan State. The report also identified the increasing use of non-controlled chemicals as a challenge because criminal groups can exploit regulatory gaps. It recorded, as one example, a 2023 seizure of 3.9 million pharmaceutical tablets containing pseudoephedrine originating from India and destined for Myanmar.

The significance of this example is not simply the seizure itself. It demonstrates how a chemical or pharmaceutical product can begin within a legitimate commercial supply chain and subsequently become relevant to illicit drug production. It also demonstrates why cooperation between exporting and importing countries is necessary: the country from which a shipment originates may have information that is unavailable to authorities at its destination.

5. India's NDPS Act, 1985

For an Indian delegation, the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances Act, 1985 (NDPS Act) is particularly relevant. The Act was enacted to consolidate and amend Indian law relating to narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances and expressly includes implementation of India's obligations under international drug-control conventions among its purposes.

The important point for beginners is that international conventions do not themselves conduct arrests, inspect warehouses or prosecute individuals. National law gives domestic authorities the legal power to act. Therefore, an effective international framework requires States to translate international obligations into domestic legislation, regulations, licensing requirements and enforcement mechanisms.

6. Project Prism and Project Cohesion

INCB has also supported international operational initiatives such as Project Prism and Project Cohesion, which focus on preventing the diversion and trafficking of precursor chemicals and synthetic-drug-related substances. These initiatives demonstrate the practical value of cooperation between INCB, national authorities, customs agencies and police organisations. WCO records that it participates in these efforts alongside INCB and other partners.

The broader lesson is that information must move as quickly as the chemicals themselves. A customs officer in one country may identify a suspicious shipment, while police in another country may already have information about the company or network behind it. Without a mechanism for sharing that information, each authority may see only an isolated transaction.

7. Why These Examples Matter for the Agenda

Taken together, these examples show three major problems that a resolution should address. First, legitimate chemicals can be diverted, meaning that controls must cover supply chains rather than only finished drugs. Second, criminal networks adapt, as demonstrated by the shift towards alternative fentanyl precursors and non-scheduled chemicals. Third, no State can monitor the entire supply chain alone because manufacturing, trade, transportation and illicit use may occur in different jurisdictions. Existing mechanisms such as Article 12, PEN Online, national precursor legislation, customs cooperation and international police networks therefore provide a foundation for further measures. The central policy question for delegates is how to strengthen these mechanisms without unnecessarily disrupting legitimate chemical, pharmaceutical and scientific trade.

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Possible Gaps in the Existing Precursor-Control System and Previous International Efforts

❖ Possible Gaps in the Existing Precursor-Control System

Although the international community has developed a substantial framework for controlling precursor chemicals, significant implementation and enforcement gaps remain. The first major problem is weak implementation of international standards. The 1988 Convention establishes important obligations, but States differ considerably in their ability and willingness to implement licensing, monitoring, reporting and enforcement measures. International rules therefore do not automatically produce identical levels of control in every country. The existence of international standards is only effective when States translate them into domestic legislation, establish competent authorities and provide those authorities with sufficient resources.

A second gap is poor information-sharing. A suspicious chemical shipment may involve a manufacturer, exporter, importer, customs authority and police agency located in several different countries. If information about a suspicious order or stopped shipment does not reach the relevant authorities quickly, traffickers may exploit the delay. Information may also remain within separate government agencies, creating gaps between customs, police, drug-control authorities and chemical regulators. Effective precursor control therefore requires rapid and reliable communication between both domestic and international authorities.

Another difficulty is different national regulations. A chemical may be strictly controlled in one country but subject to weaker controls in another. Criminal networks can exploit these regulatory differences by purchasing or routing chemicals through jurisdictions where oversight is less developed. This becomes particularly difficult when dealing with non-controlled substitute chemicals. Traffickers may move away from internationally scheduled precursors and seek alternative substances that are not yet controlled. This allows illicit manufacturers to continue production even when traditional precursor chemicals become more difficult to obtain.

New psychoactive substances (NPS) create a related problem. NPS may involve new or modified chemical structures that are not initially included within international or national control lists. Their legal status can also differ between countries. Criminal manufacturers can therefore exploit differences between national systems and introduce new substances faster than governments can formally regulate them. This creates a need for flexible monitoring and early-warning mechanisms rather than relying exclusively on fixed lists of prohibited substances.

Lack of resources and monitoring difficulties also affect implementation. Customs authorities, police agencies, chemical regulators and laboratories require trained personnel, technical equipment, databases and adequate funding to identify suspicious chemicals and investigate diversion. Countries with limited resources may struggle to monitor the enormous volume of legitimate international chemical trade. Since most precursor chemicals have legitimate commercial uses, authorities cannot realistically inspect every transaction or shipment in the same manner.

The growth of online chemical markets has added another layer of difficulty. Online marketplaces, social media and other digital platforms can allow suppliers and buyers to communicate across borders without traditional face-to-face interactions. Chemicals may also be advertised under alternative names or descriptions, making them harder for authorities to identify. Online transactions can therefore make it more difficult to establish the identity, location and actual intentions of buyers and sellers.

Finally, private-sector compliance remains crucial. Chemical manufacturers, distributors, freight companies and traders are often the first actors capable of identifying unusual orders. However, smaller businesses may lack the expertise or resources necessary to recognise indicators of diversion. Excessively complicated regulations may also create difficulties for legitimate businesses. Governments therefore need to combine mandatory controls with education, guidance and cooperation with the chemical and pharmaceutical industries. Public-private partnerships can help businesses understand their responsibilities while allowing governments to benefit from industry knowledge.

❖Previous International Efforts

The international community has already developed several mechanisms to address precursor-chemical diversion. These efforts demonstrate that the problem

is not without existing solutions; rather, a major challenge is improving the implementation, coordination and adaptation of measures that already exist.

The fundamental legal foundation is the 1988 United Nations Convention against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances, particularly Article 12. Article 12 established an international system for controlling chemicals frequently used in illicit drug manufacture and created mechanisms for cooperation concerning their production, distribution and international trade. The Convention's Table I and Table II system allows States to apply controls to relevant chemicals according to their potential use in illicit drug production. The framework also allows substances to be added to the control system as trafficking patterns evolve. This represents an important development because it moved international drug control beyond finished drugs and towards the chemical inputs required for their manufacture.

The Commission on Narcotic Drugs (CND) has subsequently strengthened this system by adding emerging substances to international control. A useful example is the response to illicit fentanyl manufacture. NPP and ANPP were placed under international control in 2017.

Traffickers subsequently adapted by using alternative precursor chemicals. In 2022, the CND added norfentanyl, 4-AP and 1-boc-4-AP to Table I of the 1988 Convention. This demonstrates both the usefulness and limitation of international scheduling. Scheduling provides governments with a legal basis for controlling particular substances, but criminal networks may adapt by searching for alternative chemical inputs.

The International Narcotics Control Board (INCB) has developed several practical mechanisms to implement this framework. One of the most important is PEN Online, which facilitates the exchange of pre-export notifications between national authorities. Before certain controlled precursor chemicals are exported, the relevant authorities in the importing country can receive information about the proposed shipment. This gives them an opportunity to verify the importer, intended use and legitimacy of the transaction before the chemical leaves the exporting country.

INCB has also developed PEN Online Light, which facilitates voluntary pre-export notifications for certain non-scheduled chemicals. This is significant because traffickers increasingly attempt to obtain substances that are not included in the international control tables. Monitoring such chemicals can provide authorities with an early warning of potential diversion even before a substance becomes formally

controlled.

INCB has additionally supported international operational initiatives such as Project Prism and Project Cohesion. These initiatives facilitate cooperation between national authorities and international partners in relation to the diversion and trafficking of precursor chemicals and other substances used in illicit drug manufacture. They allow authorities to exchange intelligence, identify suspicious transactions and coordinate enforcement activities. Their underlying principle is that information collected by one country can be useful to authorities in another country when chemical shipments cross multiple jurisdictions.

UNODC programmes have also contributed to international precursor control through research, technical assistance, training and early-warning mechanisms. The Global SMART Programme, for example, monitors developments involving synthetic drugs and emerging patterns of manufacture and trafficking. UNODC has highlighted the increasing use of non-scheduled and modified precursor chemicals and has promoted approaches such as improved information-sharing, drug profiling, flexible legislation, regional cooperation and public-private partnerships.
UNODC's Early Warning Advisory is another important mechanism for identifying emerging psychoactive substances and providing information to governments. Early-warning systems are particularly important because authorities may need to understand a new substance or manufacturing trend before they can determine whether additional legal controls are necessary.

International chemical-control systems have also expanded beyond simply controlling chemicals listed in Tables I and II. INCB maintains a limited international special surveillance list covering substances that are not formally scheduled but may be relevant to illicit drug manufacture. This provides governments and industry with information about chemicals that may warrant additional attention. Such systems attempt to address the problem of traffickers simply replacing a controlled precursor with an alternative substance.

Customs cooperation provides another major layer of the international response. The World Customs Organization (WCO) works with national customs administrations and international partners to improve border controls, risk management, intelligence exchange and the detection of suspicious shipments. Cooperation between customs authorities, INCB and UNODC allows information concerning chemical shipments and trafficking patterns to be shared more effectively. This is important because international precursor controls would have limited value if regulated chemicals could simply pass through borders without

adequate monitoring.

Regional initiatives have also become increasingly important because precursor diversion frequently follows specific regional trade routes. In Southeast Asia, for example, ASEAN Member States have strengthened cooperation against illicit drug trafficking and precursor chemicals. Regional cooperation allows neighbouring countries to share intelligence, coordinate enforcement and address cross-border trafficking routes collectively. It can also help reduce regulatory differences that traffickers may otherwise exploit.

Finally, public-private partnerships recognise that governments cannot independently monitor every chemical transaction. Chemical manufacturers, pharmaceutical companies, distributors, freight companies and other private-sector actors often possess information about customers and transactions that government authorities do not immediately have. Governments can therefore cooperate with businesses to identify unusual orders, verify legitimate end-users and encourage the reporting of suspicious transactions.

Public-private cooperation is particularly important for non-scheduled chemicals, where traditional legal controls may not yet apply. Industry can sometimes identify unusual purchasing behaviour before law-enforcement agencies become aware of it. At the same time, governments can provide businesses with guidance about diversion indicators and their reporting obligations.

Conclusion

The diversion of precursor chemicals into illicit drug manufacturing is fundamentally a supply-chain and international-cooperation problem. Since many precursor chemicals have legitimate applications in the pharmaceutical, industrial, agricultural and scientific sectors, completely prohibiting their production or trade is neither practical nor desirable. Effective control must instead focus on preventing legitimate chemicals from being redirected towards illicit purposes while ensuring that lawful trade remains uninterrupted.

The existing international framework, particularly Article 12 of the 1988 UN Convention, already provides important mechanisms for controlling precursor chemicals. Systems such as PEN Online, suspicious-transaction reporting, international scheduling, customs cooperation, information-sharing and early-warning mechanisms demonstrate that significant tools are already available. However, their effectiveness is weakened by inconsistent national implementation, limited resources, fragmented information-sharing, differences in domestic regulations and the increasing use of non-controlled substitute chemicals and online markets.

Consequently, the objective of international action should not simply be to create additional mechanisms, but to strengthen and repair existing ones. Greater interoperability between national databases, faster exchange of information, improved training for customs and regulatory authorities, stronger monitoring of suspicious transactions and wider use of risk-based inspections can improve existing systems. At the same time, mechanisms must remain adaptable to emerging chemicals and changing trafficking methods.

Ultimately, successful precursor control requires a balance between security and legitimate commerce. Governments, international organisations, customs authorities, law-enforcement agencies and the private sector must work together to close gaps in the existing system. Strengthening what already works, addressing what does not, and ensuring that international cooperation keeps pace with evolving methods of illicit manufacture should remain at the centre of efforts to prevent precursor-chemical diversion.