

Human Rights Council
Thirtieth session
Agenda items 2 and 8
**Annual report of the United Nations High Commissioner
for Human Rights and reports of the Office of the
High Commissioner and the Secretary-General**

**Follow-up to and implementation of the Vienna
Declaration and Programme of Action**

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Study on the impact of the world drug problem on the enjoyment of human rights

Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights*

E. Access to essential medicines

31. In the preamble to the 1961 Convention, it is recognized that the medical use of narcotic drugs is indispensable for the relief of pain and suffering. Nevertheless, millions of people worldwide who require essential medicines for pain, drug dependency and other health conditions find that availability is often limited or absent. The Special Rapporteur on the right to health noted that access to these medications is often excessively restricted for fear that they will be diverted from legitimate medical uses to illicit purposes (see A/65/255, para. 41).

32. Restricting access to opioids affects not only the availability of opioid substitution therapy but also three unrelated areas where access to controlled medicines is essential: (a) management of moderate to severe pain, including as part of palliative care for people with life-limiting illnesses; (b) certain emergency obstetric situations; and (c) management of epilepsy (see A/65/255, para. 42).

33. In its general comment No. 14 (2000) on the right to the highest attainable standard of health, the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights stated that ensuring access to essential drugs, including opioids, is an essential element of the right to health and that States must comply with this obligation regardless of resource constraints. The Special Rapporteur has noted that access to controlled drugs is a critical part of the right to health and recommended that States increase access to controlled essential medicines (see A/65/255, paras. 40-47 and 76).

34. The International Narcotics Control Board has consistently found that availability of essential controlled medicines is too limited in many countries. In its 2014 annual report, the Board noted that approximately 5.5 billion people, or three quarters of the world's population, live in countries where access to medicines containing narcotic drugs is low or non-existent and have inadequate access to treatment for moderate to severe pain. The Board also noted that 92 per cent of the world's morphine (an opioid) is consumed by 17 per cent of the world's population, primarily in North America, Oceania and Western Europe. The Board and WHO have both recognized that unnecessarily restrictive drug

* Late submission.

control regulations and practices are a significant barrier to accessing essential controlled medicines.¹

¹ See *Report of the International Narcotics Control Board for 2014*, para. 12, and WHO, *Ensuring Balance in National Policies on Controlled Substances: Guidance for Availability and Accessibility of Controlled Medicines* (Malta, 2011).