



COMMUNIQUE ISSUED AT THE END OF THE 11TH BIENNIAL INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON "DRUGS, ALCOHOL AND SOCIETY IN AFRICA" ORGANIZED BY THE AFRICAN CENTRE FOR RESEARCH AND INFORMATION ON SUBSTANCE ABUSE (CRISA) AT THE LAGOS AIRPORT HOTEL, IKEJA, NIGERIA, ON 21-22 AUGUST 2014

The 11th Biennial International Conference on "Drugs, Alcohol and Society in Africa" organized by the African Centre for Research and Information on Substance Abuse (CRISA), opened on 21 August 2014 with a plenary session chaired by Dr Rahman Lawal, the Chief Medical Director, Federal Neuropsychiatric Hospital, Yaba, Lagos. His Excellency, Chief Olusegun Obasanjo, former President of Nigeria and Chairman, West Africa Commission on Drugs (WACD), was the Special Guest of Honour. More than 100 participants attended the conference from several countries in Africa and beyond, including Kenya, South Africa, Zimbabwe, UK, Austria and Nigeria.

The opening session was attended by many dignitaries from various walks of life, including Ms Mariam Sissoko, Country Representative of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), representatives of the Director-General of the National Agency for Drug Administration and Control (NAFDAC), National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA), Ministry of Health and other government and Non-Governmental Organisations. The conference received support from the European Union "Response to Drugs and Related Organized Crime in Nigeria" project, the UNODC, Population Council, Yaba Neuropsychiatric Hospital, Open Society Foundations and the International Society of Addiction Journal Editors.

In his opening statement, the Director of CRISA, Professor Isidore S. Obot, provided an overview of the mission, objectives and activities of CRISA, and formally welcomed participants to the conference. He stated that the 2014 conference would focus on access to treatment for people with drug use disorders because of growing demand and the lack of opportunities for evidence-based treatment in African countries.

A keynote address was delivered by Dr. Igor Koutsenok, Chief of Prevention, Treatment and Rehabilitation Section at the UNODC, Vienna, Austria. In his well-researched and highly captivating address, titled: Common Mythologies about Substance Use Disorders: What we Know from Science and What we have in Practice?, Dr. Koutsenok discussed a number of myths blighting treatment for substance use disorders globally. He stressed the need for treatment to be grounded in scientific evidence in order to guarantee effectiveness.

In his speech the special guest of honour, Chief Olusegun Obasanjo pointed out that substance use is a problem that has ravaged the fabrics of our society. He lauded the Centre for Research and Information on Substance Abuse (CRISA) for its consistency in working towards addressing the problem over the years. He equally espoused a change in the way we address drug problems from an over-emphasis on law enforcement to a public health approach. The Country Representative of the UNODC in Nigeria, Ms. Sissoko, in her speech made known the readiness of her office to partner with all groups working on drugs issues in Nigeria and informed participants that the UNODC has been entrusted with the implementation of the EU funded project on "Response to Drugs and Related Crime in Nigeria", a project which has been on-going since 2013 and will last till 2017. Goodwill messages were received from various agencies, including the National Agency for Food and Drug Administration and Control (NAFDAC), National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA) and other bodies represented.

Four scientific sessions were held on the first day of the conference. The first session focused on the epidemiology of substance use and related disorders. Six papers were presented and these engendered interesting debate and questions bordering on methodology, the implications of findings for policy and intervention among others. The second scientific session was a special panel on Key Populations and Drug Use in Nigeria organized by the Population Council, Nigeria. The presentations covered drug use among men who have sex with men (MSMs), female sex workers (FSWs), and Injecting Drug Users (IDUs), along with a stimulating session of questions and interaction. The third and fourth sessions, which focused on prevention, treatment and rehabilitation, took place concurrently. The first day of the conference ended with a business session organized by the Nigerian Society for Addiction Professionals (NISAP).

Activities on Day Two commenced with a Special panel titled *Not Just in Transit: Drugs, the State and Society in West Africa (Report of the West Africa Commission on Drugs)*. Panelists were Professor Etannibi Alemika of the Department of Sociology, University of Jos, Jos, Nigeria; Professor Hope Obianwu of Niger Delta University, Wilberforce Island, Bayelsa State, Nigeria; Dr Neo Morojele of the Medical Research Council, Pretoria, South Africa; and Dr. Axel Klein of Cocaine Route Monitoring and Support Project, London, UK. The Discussant was Mr. Adeolu Ogunrombi, a youth activist and Member of the West Africa Commission on Drugs, while the session was chaired by Dr. Richard Pates, President of the International Society of Addiction Journal Editors (ISAJE) and Editor of Journal of Substance Abuse. The panellists offered their views on the report after a critical, objective review. They all agreed that the report was a very good, well-researched document with practical utility. Panellists expressed concerns over several aspects of the drug situation in Africa in general and the report in particular, such as the dearth of facilities and personnel to treat or manage substance use disorders; weak institutions, corruption and unemployment in several countries; need for clarification and operationalization of some of the recommendations in the report; need for advocacy in order for various stakeholders to key into the implementation of the recommendations; need for ECOWAS and other relevant bodies to have a policy dialogue on drug issues; and the need to be cautious with the emphasis on de-criminalisation, among several other concerns. The discussion generated robust debates among participants but all agreed that the document is a welcome development that should be seen as a process rather than a final, conclusive document.

Another special panel focused on the Assessment, Prevention and Management of Drug Use in Prisons and Among Youths, and was organised by Prisoners' Rehabilitation and Welfare Action (PRAWA) in collaboration with the International Corrections and Prisons Association (ICPA-Africa). Parallel scientific sessions were also held on the second day on the following topics: Alcohol; Drug policy; Psychosocial and cultural aspects of drug use; Health, economic and social consequences; Mutual help and support groups and addiction, among others.

In the concluding plenary session participants called on governments to recognize the growing problem of abuse of various licit and illicit substances, especially among young people in Africa; the personal and social costs associated with this situation; and the need to develop and implement comprehensive, integrated and evidence-based policies to address the drug problem in African countries from a public health perspective.



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