

Report on the

# Regional Health Alliance meeting on strengthening public health action on substance use through UN collaboration



Cairo, Egypt  
1 June 2025

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Substance use is a significant public health issue with far-reaching impacts on security, safety and development. It can cost up to 2% of gross domestic product in some countries through crime, the impact on health and lost productivity. Globally, approximately 292 million people, or 5.6% of those aged 15 to 64, were reported to have used drugs in 2022. Alarming, 64 million individuals are struggling with substance use disorders. In the WHO Eastern Mediterranean Region, drug use affects 6.7% of the population. However, stigma and unequal access to medications mean that only 1 in 13 individuals with substance use disorders in the Region received treatment in 2022, compared with 1 in 11 globally. Often, responses to substance use rely on punitive measures, law enforcement and restricting supply. However, these approaches reinforce stigma and overlook essential prevention and harm reduction efforts.

Recognizing these pressing needs, the WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean launched a regional flagship initiative on accelerating public health action on substance use, which was endorsed by the WHO Regional Committee for the Eastern Mediterranean at its 71st session in 2024. Through contextualized, evidence-based public health interventions in both stable and emergency settings, the regional flagship initiative aims to reduce the morbidity, mortality and social costs associated with substance use disorders. Specifically, the initiative aims to prevent substance use initiation among vulnerable populations, reduce substance availability, promote accessibility to services for the management of substance use disorders, and strengthen monitoring, surveillance and evidence generation.

The Regional Health Alliance (RHA) is a key mechanism for enhancing the delivery of the health-related Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) through interagency cooperation across the WHO's Eastern Mediterranean Region. The WHO Regional Director's flagship initiatives aim to build and strengthen partnerships with RHA members, building on WHO's convening mandate, and respecting the mandates of the various United Nations (UN) agencies, to advance the implementation of the initiatives' activities through enhanced collaboration among UN agencies, leveraging their respective comparative advantages.

On 1 June 2025, WHO convened a hybrid in-person/virtual high-level interagency meeting in Cairo, Egypt, of selected UN agencies – the International Organization for Migration (IOM), Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) and United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) – on strengthening public health action on substance use through UN collaboration, leveraging the collaborative platform of the RHA.

The purpose of the meeting was to seek synergies and embark on joint action to address the challenge of substance use in the Eastern Mediterranean Region by enabling and strengthening effective collaboration between RHA members to leverage the power and potential of the joint UN agencies' action.

The meeting's specific objectives were to:

- strengthen coordinated interagency regional support to address substance use;
- identify possibilities to undertake joint country missions and support country-level policy dialogues;
- develop country-level support plans and align agency contributions; and
- develop joint proposals for resource mobilization.

## **2. SUMMARY OF DISCUSSIONS**

Participants were briefed on the activities being conducted to operationalize the UN Common Position on Drugs in response to drug problems in the Middle East and North Africa, with extensive consultations being undertaken with UN agencies, the League of Arab States and the Arab Interior Ministers Council to anchor drug policies within broader UN planning and funding platforms.

The UN Common Position on Drugs, adopted in November 2018, provides for drug policies to focus on human rights, public health and sustainable development, in line with the SDGs, and to reorient policies to shift from a purely repressive approach to a more balanced response. This aligns well with the regional flagship initiative.

The Common Position calls for integrating harm reduction, increasing access to voluntary treatment and abolishing disproportionate sanctions, including for personal use or possession. It also stresses engagement in discussions to identify key strategic areas and lead agencies, current country activities, and plans for the development of jointly-resourced country support workplans to accelerate the implementation of the flagship initiative for the period 2025–2028.

UNODC highlighted the importance of generating research and increasing the availability of good quality data, and expressed its commitment to joint resource mobilization, with a focus on specific country action.

IOM highlighted the need for integrating substance use interventions within broader mental health and psychosocial support programmes for mobile and migrant populations through enhanced partnerships and multisectoral action, and linking mental health and psychosocial support, substance use treatment and social integration and supporting national health systems.

UNICEF highlighted the need to integrate substance use interventions within primary health care, and using it as a platform for working across different systems and sectors to build on existing efforts to address substance use in children and adolescents through social and behaviour change interventions, including on parenting and child protection.

UNHCR reiterated the significance of integrating refugees and other forcibly displaced people into the initiative to achieve its objectives. In this regard, bilateral discussions with UN sister agencies and UNHCR country operations will be initiated.

UNAIDS outlined its focus on three critical areas of work: scaling up harm reduction interventions and expanding access to life-saving interventions, such as needle-syringe programmes and opioid agonist therapy; combating stigma and discrimination; and strengthening information generation. UNAIDS confirmed its commitment to building cohesive regional strategies and supporting national policy reform in areas such as integrating harm reduction and human rights into the substance use response. UNAIDS indicated its readiness to collaborate on joint grant proposals.

### **3. MEETING RECOMMENDATIONS AND NEXT STEPS**

There is strong momentum across countries to address substance use within broader mental health and psychosocial support and health system frameworks. Coordination platforms, both governmental and UN-based, are crucial for this. Continued national cross-sectoral dialogue and concrete planning tools will be key to moving from the development of high-level strategy to implementation of the flagship initiative to accelerate action on substance use in the Region.

Following the meeting's discussions, the following recommendations and way forward were identified.

#### *At the regional level*

1. Develop a Gantt chart to map the proposed strategic activities of the substance use flagship initiative for RHA members and their contribution to these activities.
2. Ensure resident coordinators are engaged and briefed on progress.
3. Hold quarterly meetings of RHA members to monitor the progress of the flagship initiative.
4. Explore the use of mechanisms such as the Health in All Policies approach and the UHC 2030 Global Compact for better coordination.
5. Identify substance use research priorities.

#### *At country level*

6. Refine and agree on key performance indicators with government representatives to better reflect ongoing efforts and progress.
7. Explore the establishment of high-level government coordination bodies.
8. Develop a communications strategy to shift societal perceptions, including related to khat use.
9. Utilize existing national platforms for centralized reporting.

**ANNEX 1. PROGRAMME**

<b>Timeframe</b>	<b>Agenda item</b>	<b>Key speaker(s)</b>
12:30–12:35	Welcome, rationale and objectives of the meeting	Dr Adham Ismail, Director, Programme Management, WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean
12:35–12:45	Introduction to the regional flagship initiative for accelerating the public health response to substance use	Dr Hanan Balkhy, Regional Director, WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean
12:45–12:50	Presentation on the regional flagship initiative	Dr Khalid Saeed, Regional Adviser, Mental Health and Substance Use, WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean
12:50–12:55	Video: Substance use in focus: mobilizing regional action for public health impact	
12:55–13:35	Regional Directors’/Representatives’ interventions on strategic areas of focus for addressing substance use	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dr Asmara Lua Achcar, Deputy Regional Director, IOM</li> <li>• Ms Cristina Albertin, Regional Director, UNODC</li> <li>• Dr Walid Ibrahim, Country Manager, UNAIDS</li> <li>• Dr Sowmya Kadandale, Regional Health Advisor, UNICEF</li> <li>• Mr Sherzod Zairzhanov, Senior Operations Officer, UNHCR</li> </ul>
13:35–14:15	Moderated discussion	Moderator: Dr Adham Ismail Discussion: All participants
14:15–14:30	Conclusion and way forward	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dr Adham Ismail</li> <li>• Dr Khalid Saeed</li> <li>• Dr Jamal Nasher, Coordinator, Gender Equality, Human Rights and Health Equity, WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean</li> </ul>



## **ANNEX 2. LIST OF PARTICIPANTS**

Dr Asmara Lua Achcar  
Deputy Regional Director  
IOM

Dr Walid Ibrahim  
Country Manager  
UNAIDS

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Senior Operations Officer  
UNHCR

Dr Sowmya Kadandale  
Regional Health Adviser  
UNICEF

Ms Cristina Albertin  
Regional Director  
UNODC

Ms Mirna Bouhabib  
Deputy Representative  
UNODC

Dr Mohammad Tariq Sonnan  
Head of Libya Office  
UNODC

Dr Hanan Hassan Balkhy  
Regional Director  
WHO

Dr Adham Abdel Moneim  
Director, Programme Management  
WHO

Dr Mohammed Jama  
Advisor to the Regional Director  
WHO

Dr Asmus Hammerich  
Director, Noncommunicable Diseases and Mental Health/acting Director, Healthier Populations  
WHO

Dr Awad Mataria  
Director, Department of Universal Health Coverage/Health Systems  
WHO

Dr Arash Rashidian  
Director, Science, information and Dissemination  
WHO

Dr Ahmed Zouiten  
Regional Emergency Director/WHO Representative Libya  
WHO

Ms Christina Bethke  
Acting WHO Representative, Syrian Arab Republic  
WHO

Dr Joumana Hermez  
WHO Representative, Djibouti  
WHO

Dr Ferima Zerbo  
Acting WHO Representative, Yemen  
WHO

Ms Valeria de Oliveira Cruz  
Coordinator, Country Cooperation and Collaboration  
WHO

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Regional Adviser, Health Promotion and Social Determinants of Health  
WHO

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Regional Adviser, Health Workforce  
WHO

Dr Quamrul Hasan  
Regional Adviser, Immunization, Vaccine Preventable Diseases and Polio Transition  
WHO

Dr Mehrnaz Kheirandish  
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WHO

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WHO

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Regional Adviser Mental Health  
WHO

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WHO Health Emergencies Programme Team Lead  
WHO

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WHO

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Public Health Officer  
WHO

Dr Edwina Zoghbi  
Public Health Officer  
WHO

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Technical Officer, Communication  
WHO

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Technical Officer, Noncommunicable Diseases and Mental Health  
WHO

Dr Wafaa Elsayy  
Consultant, Noncommunicable Diseases and Mental Health  
WHO

**RHA Secretariat**

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Coordinator, SDGs and Gender Equality, Human Rights and Health Equity  
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WHO

Ms Micaela Pereira  
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WHO

Ms Nourhan Elrifai  
Gender Equality, Human Rights and Health Equity Officer  
WHO

Ms Rita Meimari  
Senior Administrative Assistant  
WHO

Ms Odette Matta  
Administrative Assistant  
WHO

### **ANNEX 3. LINKS TO PRESENTATIONS AND A VIDEO SHOWN DURING THE MEETING**

Strengthening public health action on substance use through promoting collaboration and partnerships

Operationalizing the UN Common Position on Drugs: advancing integrated drug responses in MENA through a unified approach

Substance use in focus: mobilizing regional action for public health impact (video presented during the meeting)



Food and Agriculture  
Organization of the  
United Nations



**IOM**  
UN MIGRATION



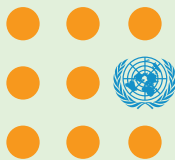
**OCHA**  
United Nations  
Office for the Coordination  
of Humanitarian Affairs



**UNAIDS**



  
**unesco**



**UNFPA**



**UN-HABITAT**



**UNHCR**  
The UN Refugee Agency

**unicef**   
for every child



**United Nations**  
Office on Drugs and Crime



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**World Health  
Organization**

Eastern Mediterranean Region