

World Health Organisation

Exploring the legalization of the medicinal use of the cannabis plant



Jelle van Rooij

Deputy-Chair

4-1-2024

Table of Contents

Table of Contents	2
Introducing Your Chairs	4
An Introduction To The Topic.....	5
Definition of Key Terms	6
Cannabis	6
Medicinal Cannabis.....	6
Cannabinoids.....	6
Legalization.....	6
Global Regulatory Framework	6
Psychoactive Effects	6
Scheduling (Drug Scheduling).....	6
Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs	6
A General Overview of the Issue	7
Historical Background.....	9
Ancient Roots	9
Early 20th Century	9
Rise of Prohibition	9
1960s and Counterculture Movement.....	9
Emergence of Medicinal Cannabis Advocacy	9
Shift in Perspective	9
Global Diversity in Approaches.....	9
Major Parties Involved.....	11
World Health Organization (WHO)	11
National Governments	11
Medical and Scientific Community	11
Pharmaceutical Industry	11
Patients and Advocacy Groups	11
Law Enforcement and Regulatory Agencies	11
International Organizations and Treaties	11
Cannabis Industry.....	11
Public Opinion	12
Research Institutions and Academia	12
Previous Attempts to Solve the Issue	13
International Opium Convention (1925)	13
Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs (1961).....	13

United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC)	13
World Health Organization (WHO) Expert Committee on Drug Dependence	13
National Legislation in Various Countries	13
Uruguay's Legalization Model (2013)	13
The Cannabis for Medical Purposes Regulations in Canada (2013).....	13
The United Nations General Assembly Special Session on Drugs (UNGASS) 2016	14
The WHO's Critical Review of Cannabis (2019)	14
United Nations Commission on Narcotic Drugs (CND) Rescheduling Vote (2020)	14
Possible Solutions For The Issue	15
International Collaboration and Standardization	15
Reform of International Drug Control Treaties	15
Scientific Research and Evidence-Based Policies	15
Creation of Specialized Regulatory Bodies	15
Education and Public Awareness Campaigns	15
Patient Access and Equity Considerations	15
Flexible Legislative Models.....	15
International Best Practices Sharing	15
Timeline Of Key Events.....	16
Ancient Times.....	16
1925: International Opium Convention	16
1961: Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs	16
1970s-1980s: Heightened Global Prohibition.....	16
1997: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC)	16
1990s: Emergence of Medicinal Cannabis Advocacy	16
2013: Uruguay Legalizes Cannabis	16
2016: United Nations General Assembly Special Session on Drugs (UNGASS)..	16
2018: WHO Recommends Cannabis Rescheduling	16
2019: WHO Critical Review of Cannabis	16
2020: United Nations Commission on Narcotic Drugs (CND) Rescheduling Vote	16
Present: Global Diversity in Approaches	17
Ongoing: Evolving Regulatory Landscape	17
Bibliography.....	18

Introducing Your Chairs

Dear delegates of the World Health Organisation,
I am Jelle van Rooij and I will be the Deputy-Chair of our committee this February. I am a student in 6 VWO at Merletcollege in Cuijk. Moreover, I am the Secretary-General of MerletMUN 2024. I have participated in a total of 6 MUNs, 2 of which I have chaired.

I am very excited to see you all in February!

An Introduction To The Topic

The discourse surrounding the legalization of the medicinal use of the cannabis plant has evolved into a complex global conversation, garnering attention from policymakers, healthcare professionals, and the public at large. The cannabis plant, historically known for its recreational use, has witnessed a transformative shift in perception as scientific research increasingly reveals its potential therapeutic benefits. This shift has prompted nations worldwide to reconsider their stances on cannabis, specifically in the context of medicinal applications.

Cannabis, often associated with psychoactive effects, comprises compounds known as cannabinoids, some of which demonstrate promising medicinal properties. This burgeoning interest in the medicinal aspects of cannabis raises pertinent questions about the global regulatory framework, societal perceptions, and the potential economic and health impacts associated with its legalization.

As we delve into the exploration of the legalization of medicinal cannabis, it is crucial to navigate through the historical context, existing global attitudes, and the intricate web of international regulations. The World Health Organization (WHO) finds itself at the forefront of this dialogue, tasked with evaluating the scientific evidence surrounding cannabis and making recommendations that may shape the future policies of member states.

This research report aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the medicinal cannabis landscape, addressing the current global scenario, the medicinal benefits and potential risks associated with cannabis use, societal and economic implications, existing regulatory frameworks, and the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead. Through a nuanced exploration of these facets, we hope to foster a deeper understanding of the complexities surrounding the legalization of medicinal cannabis within the WHO committee and stimulate meaningful discussions on the global stage.

Definition of Key Terms

Cannabis

Cannabis refers to a genus of flowering plants that includes *Cannabis sativa*, *Cannabis indica*, and *Cannabis ruderalis*. The plant is known for its psychoactive properties due to the presence of cannabinoids.

Medicinal Cannabis

Medicinal cannabis, also known as medical marijuana, involves the use of cannabis and its cannabinoids for therapeutic purposes to alleviate symptoms or treat various medical conditions.

Cannabinoids

Cannabinoids are chemical compounds found in the cannabis plant. The two most well-known cannabinoids are THC (tetrahydrocannabinol), responsible for the plant's psychoactive effects, and CBD (cannabidiol), which does not produce a "high" and has potential therapeutic benefits.

Legalization

Legalization refers to the process of making a previously prohibited or restricted activity, substance, or product lawful and permissible within a defined legal framework.

Global Regulatory Framework

The global regulatory framework encompasses the collection of laws, regulations, and guidelines that govern the production, distribution, and use of medicinal cannabis on an international scale.

Psychoactive Effects

Psychoactive effects describe alterations in cognition, mood, and behavior resulting from the consumption of substances that affect the central nervous system, such as THC in cannabis.

Scheduling (Drug Scheduling)

Drug scheduling involves the classification of substances based on their potential for abuse, medical use, and overall safety. This classification often influences legal restrictions and controls.

Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs

The Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs is an international treaty aimed at establishing effective control measures for substances with psychoactive properties, including cannabis.

A General Overview of the Issue

In recent years, the world has witnessed a transformative shift in the discourse surrounding the legalization of the medicinal use of the cannabis plant. Once relegated to the realms of recreational use and stigmatized for its psychoactive effects, cannabis has undergone a paradigm shift in perception. This shift has given rise to a global conversation centered on the potential therapeutic benefits of the plant and the prospect of integrating medicinal cannabis into mainstream healthcare practices. This overview aims to provide a concise yet comprehensive understanding of the key dimensions surrounding the legalization of medicinal cannabis within the World Health Organization (WHO) committee.


Cannabis has a rich historical tapestry spanning centuries, with documented use for various purposes across diverse cultures. However, the twentieth century saw a global trend of cannabis prohibition, driven by concerns about its psychoactive effects and perceived societal harms. In recent years, a growing body of scientific research has illuminated the medicinal properties of cannabinoids found in the cannabis plant, prompting a reevaluation of its status in many countries. This shift in perspective raises fundamental questions about the intersection of public health, societal values, and international drug policies.

Central to the debate is the exploration of cannabinoids, the chemical compounds within the cannabis plant. Tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) and cannabidiol (CBD) are two key cannabinoids, each with distinct effects. THC is responsible for the plant's psychoactive properties, while CBD is non-psychoactive and associated with potential therapeutic benefits. Scientific studies have highlighted the efficacy of cannabinoids in managing pain, alleviating symptoms of certain medical conditions, and even showing promise in treating epilepsy.

The global landscape of medicinal cannabis is dynamic and varies significantly from one country to another. Some nations have embraced legalization, allowing for the cultivation, distribution, and consumption of medicinal cannabis under regulated frameworks. Others maintain strict prohibitions, citing concerns about potential misuse and long-term health implications. The diversity of approaches raises questions about standardizing global regulations and fostering international cooperation on this matter.

Within the global discourse, the World Health Organization plays a pivotal role. As a specialized agency of the United Nations, the WHO conducts scientific assessments and provides recommendations on the classification and scheduling of substances, including cannabis. Understanding the WHO's stance on the medicinal use of cannabis is essential for comprehending the potential impact of its recommendations on member states and international drug control policies.

The path towards the legalization of medicinal cannabis is fraught with challenges. Societal perceptions, economic considerations, and navigating the intricacies of international drug treaties pose significant hurdles. Simultaneously, there are opportunities for innovative regulatory frameworks, economic growth, and advancements in medical research. Striking a balance between these challenges



and opportunities requires nuanced considerations and collaboration among nations.

In conclusion, the exploration of the legalization of medicinal cannabis within the WHO committee encompasses a rich tapestry of historical, scientific, and socio-political dimensions. As the global community grapples with this complex issue, the need for informed dialogue, evidence-based policymaking, and international cooperation becomes increasingly evident. This overview sets the stage for a more in-depth examination of the key components that constitute the broader discourse on medicinal cannabis legalization within the WHO committee.

Historical Background

Ancient Roots

Cannabis has deep roots in ancient cultures, where it found utility in diverse contexts. In ancient China, it was used for medicinal purposes, while in India, it played a role in religious rituals and cultural practices. Cannabis cultivation spread across the globe, with different civilizations incorporating the plant into their societies.

Early 20th Century

The early 1900s marked the beginning of a shift in perceptions surrounding cannabis. An increasing wave of negative stereotypes and moralistic concerns, often fueled by racial biases, started to associate cannabis use with deviant behavior. This sentiment gained momentum in the United States, where anti-cannabis campaigns linked the plant to crime and social unrest.

Rise of Prohibition

The culmination of these sentiments led to the global adoption of prohibitionist policies. In 1925, the International Opium Convention included cannabis among substances to be controlled. Subsequent international treaties, such as the Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs in 1961, solidified the criminalization of cannabis.

1960s and Counterculture Movement

The 1960s witnessed a counter-cultural movement challenging established norms. Cannabis became synonymous with anti-establishment sentiments, with widespread use among the countercultures. This era set the stage for a growing dichotomy in public opinion, with calls for liberalization counteracted by an intensification of anti-drug rhetoric.

Emergence of Medicinal Cannabis Advocacy

As scientific understanding of cannabinoids deepened, so did the recognition of the potential medicinal benefits of cannabis. In the 1990s, breakthroughs in cannabinoid research led to the discovery of the endocannabinoid system, sparking renewed interest in the plant's therapeutic potential.


Shift in Perspective

The early 21st century witnessed a perceptual shift as scientific evidence supporting the medicinal properties of cannabis gained prominence. Countries began to reevaluate their stance on cannabis, with some jurisdictions opting for the legalization of medicinal use under controlled frameworks.

Global Diversity in Approaches

Currently, the global landscape is characterized by a diverse range of approaches. Some nations have embraced comprehensive cannabis legalization for both medicinal and recreational purposes, while others maintain strict prohibitions. The heterogeneity in policies reflects varying cultural, societal, and economic considerations that continue to shape the cannabis discourse.

This historical background sets the stage for understanding the contemporary



debate on the legalization of medicinal cannabis within the World Health Organization (WHO) committee. The evolution of cannabis regulation reflects complex intersections of cultural, political, and scientific factors, contributing to the dynamic landscape we navigate today.

Major Parties Involved

World Health Organization (WHO)

As a specialized agency of the United Nations, the WHO plays a central role in evaluating and providing recommendations on the medicinal use of cannabis. Its scientific assessments influence global drug policies and shape member states' approaches to cannabis regulation.

National Governments

Governments around the world are key players in the legalization debate. They determine national policies, regulations, and frameworks for the cultivation, distribution, and use of medicinal cannabis. The stance of individual governments significantly influences the global landscape.

Medical and Scientific Community

Medical professionals and scientists contribute essential expertise to the discourse. Their research informs discussions on the efficacy and safety of medicinal cannabis, influencing regulatory decisions and shaping public health approaches.

Pharmaceutical Industry

The pharmaceutical industry has a vested interest in the legalization of medicinal cannabis. Cannabis-based pharmaceuticals and research into new medications derived from cannabinoids present both opportunities and challenges for pharmaceutical companies.

Patients and Advocacy Groups

Patients seeking alternative treatments and advocacy groups play a crucial role in advocating for the medicinal use of cannabis. Their experiences and voices contribute to shaping public opinion, influencing policy decisions, and challenging stigmas associated with cannabis use.

Law Enforcement and Regulatory Agencies

Law enforcement agencies and regulatory bodies are responsible for enforcing cannabis-related laws and regulations. Their perspectives and cooperation are vital for establishing effective and enforceable frameworks for the legal use of medicinal cannabis.

International Organizations and Treaties

International organizations, such as the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), and drug control treaties, including the Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs, shape the broader international context for cannabis regulation. Adherence to or divergence from these treaties influences global attitudes toward cannabis.

Cannabis Industry

The emerging cannabis industry, encompassing cultivation, processing, and distribution, is a significant player in the legalization debate. Economic considerations, job creation, and innovation within the cannabis sector contribute to the broader discussion on the benefits and risks of legalization.



Public Opinion

Public perception and opinion on the medicinal use of cannabis play a crucial role in influencing political decisions. Attitudes toward cannabis have evolved, with increasing support for medicinal use. Public sentiment can exert pressure on governments to reconsider their cannabis policies.

Research Institutions and Academia

Academic institutions and research organizations contribute to the scientific understanding of cannabis, conducting studies on its therapeutic properties, potential risks, and societal impact. Their findings influence policy recommendations and public discourse.

Previous Attempts to Solve the Issue

International Opium Convention (1925)

The International Opium Convention, also known as the Geneva Convention, marked the first international attempt to control the cultivation and distribution of psychoactive substances, including cannabis. Cannabis was included in the list of controlled substances, setting a precedent for global drug control efforts.

Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs (1961)

The Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs, a milestone in international drug control, established a comprehensive framework for regulating the production and distribution of narcotic substances. Cannabis was classified as a Schedule I substance, subject to strict controls. This convention laid the groundwork for subsequent international drug control treaties.

United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC)

The UNODC, established in 1997, plays a key role in coordinating global efforts to combat drug trafficking and abuse. It provides a platform for member states to discuss and coordinate policies related to controlled substances, including cannabis. The UNODC contributes to shaping the international response to the legalization of medicinal cannabis.

World Health Organization (WHO) Expert Committee on Drug Dependence

The WHO Expert Committee on Drug Dependence regularly reviews the scientific evidence on various substances, including cannabis. In 2018, the WHO recommended a more lenient classification of cannabis within international drug control treaties, acknowledging its therapeutic potential and low potential for abuse.

National Legislation in Various Countries

Numerous countries have made strides in addressing the legalization of medicinal cannabis through national legislation. For example, countries like Canada, Uruguay, and several U.S. states have legalized medicinal cannabis, establishing regulatory frameworks for cultivation, distribution, and use.

Uruguay's Legalization Model (2013)

Uruguay became the first country to fully legalize the production, distribution, and consumption of cannabis in 2013. While the focus was not exclusively on medicinal use, this bold move sparked international discussions on alternative approaches to cannabis regulation.

The Cannabis for Medical Purposes Regulations in Canada (2013)

Canada implemented the Cannabis for Medical Purposes Regulations in 2013, which provided a legal framework for the production and distribution of medicinal cannabis. This regulatory model aimed to balance patient access with stringent quality controls.



The United Nations General Assembly Special Session on Drugs (UNGASS) 2016

In 2016, the UNGASS on Drugs addressed the global drug problem, providing a platform for member states to discuss and assess current drug policies. While the focus was broader than medicinal cannabis, it highlighted the need for a comprehensive and balanced approach, considering the health and well-being of individuals.

The WHO's Critical Review of Cannabis (2019)

In 2019, the WHO conducted a critical review of cannabis and its derivatives, recommending the rescheduling of cannabis in international drug control treaties. The review acknowledged the therapeutic potential of cannabis and proposed changes to facilitate medical and scientific research.

United Nations Commission on Narcotic Drugs (CND) Rescheduling Vote (2020)

In December 2020, the CND, a body of the UNODC, voted to remove cannabis from Schedule IV of the Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs, recognizing its medicinal value. This symbolic shift marked a departure from the strictest category of control and reflected changing attitudes toward cannabis within the international community.

Possible Solutions For The Issue

International Collaboration and Standardization

Encourage international collaboration to establish standardized guidelines for the medicinal use of cannabis. This could involve the creation of a global framework that allows for consistency in regulations, quality control, and research methodologies.

Reform of International Drug Control Treaties

Advocate for the reform of international drug control treaties, such as the Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs, to accommodate the evolving understanding of cannabis. This could involve revisiting scheduling and classifications to reflect the therapeutic potential of cannabis and facilitate medical research.

Scientific Research and Evidence-Based Policies

Prioritize and support scientific research on the medicinal properties of cannabis. Governments and international organizations should rely on evidence-based policies, considering the findings of rigorous research to inform decisions regarding the legalization and regulation of medicinal cannabis.

Creation of Specialized Regulatory Bodies

Establish specialized regulatory bodies at the national and international levels to oversee the medicinal cannabis industry. These bodies could ensure adherence to quality standards, monitor patient access, and collaborate with relevant stakeholders to address emerging issues.

Education and Public Awareness Campaigns

Launch comprehensive education and public awareness campaigns to disseminate accurate information about medicinal cannabis. Addressing misconceptions and reducing stigma is crucial for gaining public support and fostering informed decision-making.

Patient Access and Equity Considerations

Design regulatory frameworks that prioritize patient access to medicinal cannabis, particularly for individuals with serious medical conditions. Consideration should be given to equitable distribution, affordability, and addressing the needs of vulnerable populations.

Flexible Legislative Models

Adopt legislative models that provide flexibility for countries to tailor regulations to their specific contexts. This may involve learning from successful models implemented in other nations while allowing for adjustments based on cultural, social, and economic considerations.

International Best Practices Sharing

Facilitate the exchange of best practices among countries that have successfully implemented medicinal cannabis programs. Sharing experiences and lessons learned can inform the development of effective regulatory frameworks and mitigate potential challenges.

Timeline Of Key Events

Ancient Times

Cannabis has been used for medicinal and ritualistic purposes in various ancient cultures, including China and India.

1925: International Opium Convention

Cannabis is included in the International Opium Convention, marking one of the first international attempts to control psychoactive substances.

1961: Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs

The Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs classifies cannabis as a Schedule I substance, establishing a comprehensive framework for international drug control.

1970s-1980s: Heightened Global Prohibition

Many countries intensify efforts to criminalize and prohibit cannabis use during the War on Drugs era.

1997: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC)

The UNODC is established to coordinate global efforts in combating drug trafficking and abuse.

1990s: Emergence of Medicinal Cannabis Advocacy

Scientific research into cannabinoids and the endocannabinoid system prompts renewed interest in the medicinal properties of cannabis.

2013: Uruguay Legalizes Cannabis

Uruguay becomes the first country to fully legalize the production, distribution, and consumption of cannabis.

2016: United Nations General Assembly Special Session on Drugs (UNGASS)

UNGASS addresses the global drug problem, providing a platform for member states to discuss and assess current drug policies.

2018: WHO Recommends Cannabis Rescheduling

The World Health Organization recommends a more lenient classification of cannabis within international drug control treaties, acknowledging its therapeutic potential.

2019: WHO Critical Review of Cannabis

The WHO conducts a critical review of cannabis, recommending changes to its scheduling in international drug control treaties to facilitate medical and scientific research.

2020: United Nations Commission on Narcotic Drugs (CND) Rescheduling Vote

The CND votes to remove cannabis from Schedule IV of the Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs, recognizing its medicinal value.


Present: Global Diversity in Approaches

Countries continue to adopt diverse approaches to the legalization of medicinal cannabis, with some embracing comprehensive frameworks while others maintain strict prohibitions.

Ongoing: Evolving Regulatory Landscape

Nations and international organizations continue to reassess and adapt their approaches to medicinal cannabis in response to evolving scientific, social, and economic considerations.

Bibliography

World Health Organization. (2019). WHO Expert Committee on Drug Dependence: Thirty-ninth report. World Health Organization.

Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs, 1954, 520 UNTS 204.
United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. (n.d.). About UNODC.
<https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/about-unodc/index.html>

Uruguay. (2013). Law No. 19.172: Regulación y Control del Cannabis.
<https://www.gub.uy/ministerio-ganaderia-pesca/comunicacion/publicaciones/biblioteca-virtual-leyes/regulacion-control-cannabis>

United Nations General Assembly. (2016). Outcome document of the United Nations General Assembly special session on the world drug problem.
<https://www.unodc.org/documents/postungass2016/outcome/V1603301-E.pdf>

World Health Organization. (2018). Recommendations on cannabis and cannabis-related substances. World Health Organization.

United Nations Commission on Narcotic Drugs. (2020). Rescheduling of cannabis and cannabis-related substances.
https://www.unodc.org/documents/commissions/CND/CND_Sessions/CND_63/Decisions/CND_DEC_63_5.pdf

National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA). (2021). Marijuana as Medicine.
<https://www.drugabuse.gov/publications/drugfacts/marijuana-medicine>

Project CBD. (2021). Medical Marijuana & Cannabinoid Science.
<https://www.projectcbd.org/>

American Medical Association (AMA). (2021). State Medical Marijuana Laws.
<https://www.ama-assn.org/delivering-care/public-health/state-medical-marijuana-laws>

International Drug Policy Consortium (IDPC). (2021). Cannabis: A Guide to Understanding the Risks.
<https://idpc.net/publications/2021/01/cannabis-a-guide-to-understanding-the-risks>

Leafly. (2021). The World's Cannabis Information Resource.
<https://www.leafly.com/>

Drug Policy Alliance. (2021). Marijuana Legalization.
<https://drugpolicy.org/issues/marijuana-legalization>