

## **Statement of the ACERWC Special Rapporteur on Health on the occasion of the the International Day against Drug Abuse and Illicit Trafficking**

The African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACERWC/the Committee) joins the global community on 26 June 2025 to observe the International Day against Drug Abuse and Illicit Trafficking, celebrated this year under the theme ***“The Evidence is Clear: Invest in Prevention- Break the cycle.”***

As the treaty body mandated to foresee the protection and the promotion of Children’s rights on the Continent, the ACERWC, guided by Article 28 of the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child( ACRWC/the Charter), which requires every State Party to “take all appropriate measures to protect the child from the use of narcotics and illicit use of psychotropic substances as defined in the relevant international treaties, and to prevent the use of children in the production and trafficking of such substances,” has consistently situated the protection of children from substance use as a standing priority across its normative, monitoring and advocacy mandates, integrating this issue as a cross-cutting concern in its ongoing work. To advance this agenda the ACERWC has convened the 2023 Day of General Discussion, during its 41st Ordinary Session, on the Protection of Children from Substance Use, which culminated in the adoption of an Outcome Statement containing key recommendations to AU Member States, AUC, ACERWC, and Civil Society Organisations. The Committee, through its State-party reporting and follow up procedures, continues to urge States to adopt and adequately resource comprehensive, preventive, responsive and protective measures to address and combat substance use among children. Furthermore, the Committee

anchored the protection of children from drug-use in Aspiration 7 of Agenda 2040, thereby reaffirming Africa's collective commitment to protect every child from exploitation and all forms of abuse, including drug abuse. This commitment is further reaffirmed through the ongoing development of General Comment No. 28 on drug abuse by the ACERWC and the AUC Department of Health, Humanitarian Affairs and Social Development.

Despite commendable national and regional efforts, the Committee observes with growing concern the recent evidence underscoring an alarming uptick in substance-use among African's children and adolescents. According to the 2023 Pan-African Epidemiological Network on Drug Use (PAENDU) report, children aged nine years and above are already appearing in treatment services for substance use disorders, signalling very early initiation of use in some settings. Complementing these findings, the UNODC's World Drug Report 2024 highlights that Africa has the lowest treatment-coverage rate worldwide at merely around 2.8 % in 2022.

Recognizing the devastating and far-reaching impact of substance abuse on the health, development and well-being of children, the African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child reiterates its deep concern over children's increasing exposure to substance use whether through direct use, exposure within family or community settings, or through exploitation in drug production and trafficking. Further recognizing the overlapping causes and impact of substance use which not only undermines children's rights to survival, development, and protection, but also significantly heightens their vulnerability to multiple forms of abuse, including sexual exploitation, trafficking, and forced labour. These risks are further compounded for children in precarious situations such as those living in poverty, in street situations, without parental care, or affected by conflict or displacement.

Cognizant that the increasing involvement of children in substance use whether as users or victims of exploitation in the illicit drug economy presents a growing

interlinked challenges and concerns to Public-health, Justice systems, and Child-protection and social services. It underscores the imperative for sustained, cross-sectoral investment in child-sensitive health care, justice, prevention, early intervention, rehabilitation and social-reintegration services alongside robust data systems to monitor both impact and coverage.

Marking this International Day, the Committee, through its Special rapporteur on Health, seizes the opportunity to remind Member States of their obligation under the African Charter to take all necessary legislative, administrative, and other appropriate measures to prevent and respond to the involvement of children in the use, abuse, production, and trafficking of narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances, in accordance with article 28 of the ACRWC; and to align their national policies and laws with existing continental frameworks, including the Agenda 2040; Agenda 2063; the African Union Plan of Action on Drug Control and Crime Prevention (2019–2025) and the African Union Health Strategy (2016–2030).

In line with this year themes of the 2025 Day of the African Child ***“Planning and Budgeting for Children’s Rights: Progress since 2010”*** and the WGD 2025 theme ***“The Evidence is Clear: Invest in Prevention”***. **The Committee, on this occasion, further urges Member States to:**

- Increase public investment in child-centered prevention programmes by allocating adequate, and sustainable budget lines and integrate clear prevention targets, indicators and funding across health, education, justice, social-protection and digital-safety frameworks to adopt and implement evidence-based, age-appropriate prevention interventions in schools, communities and digital spaces, to build children’s resilience and prevent initial exposure and avert early initiation into use of drugs and substances by children particularly children in vulnerable situations including those living in poverty, on the move, in street situations or affected by conflict;
- Guarantee universal access to integrated health, treatment, mental

health, psychosocial support and harm-reduction services for children affected by substance use particularly those in vulnerable situations. This includes expanding free, confidential, and child-friendly services in primary-health, school-health and community settings; equipping national and local systems with multidisciplinary trained personnel, adequate infrastructure, and sustainable resources and deploying outreach models that reach hard-to-reach settings, and ensure integrated prevention and early intervention without discrimination.

- Strengthen child-sensitive Justice, protection and law-enforcement Systems through embedding diversion measures for children involved in drug-related offences to ensure that rescued children are treated as victims, not perpetrators, provide continuous child-rights training for law enforcement, border officers, prosecutors and judges, and establish formal referral protocols linking justice, health and child-protection systems; as well as resource specialised units to detect and dismantle networks exploiting children in drug production and trafficking.
- Establish and allocate targeted resources to sustain child-sensitive, community-based prevention and protection systems to prevent the involvement of children in drug production and trafficking including through the development and implementation of community-based surveillance and early-warning mechanisms, referral systems, awareness-raising campaigns, socio-economic support for at-risk families and communities particularly in high-incidence areas and support the operationalisation of multi-sectoral structures such as child protection committees and drug prevention taskforces with clear mandates and adequate funding;
- Establish or reinforce multisectoral coordination mechanisms involving health, justice, education, and child protection sectors as well as civil society and children themselves to coordinate drug prevention efforts, monitor progress, and ensure accountability, and develop or strengthen national data systems to collect and produce disaggregated data and indicators on substance use, services coverage and outcomes, and use these data to inform budget planning, policies and programs development and evaluation.

## **To Civil Society Organizations and Other Non-State Actors:**

- Scale up community outreach by expanding peer-education, parenting, and early-intervention initiatives that are child-centered, culturally and age-appropriate, to raise awareness on substance use and its impacts on children, and to strengthen the resilience of children, families, and communities;
- Collaborate with relevant government institutions and key stakeholders including and community actors to develop and implement child-centred prevention programs and to establish or reinforce community early warning, reporting, and referral mechanisms to facilitate children at risk or already affected by substance use access to appropriate health, protection, and psychosocial services;
- Facilitate safe spaces for meaningful child participation in drug prevention and response initiatives, including by supporting child-led advocacy and engaging children including those with lived experience, to shape legislation, budgets, programmes and evaluation of public policies related to drug control and child protection;
- Engage in systematic data collection, conduct community-level research and case documentation on the prevalence, drivers and impacts of drug use and trafficking; and submit alternative reports and communications to the ACERWC and other Human rights organs.

Done in Maseru, Kingdom of Lesotho 26 June 2025