

# DRUG POLICY AND HARM REDUCTION IN THE CONTEXT OF THE ECONOMIC CRISIS

*DEVELOPMENTS AND CHALLENGES*

## NATIONAL DIALOGUE MEETINGS' REPORTS

- ❑ Athens, Greece
- ❑ Sofia, Bulgaria
- ❑ Bucharest, Romania
- ❑ Nicosia, Cyprus
- ❑ Torino, Italy
- ❑ Lisbon, Portugal



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## INTRODUCTION

The current document consists of six (6) reports summarizing the most important conclusions produced as a result of the corresponding national dialogue meetings, which organization “Diogenis Drug Policy Dialogue” implemented within the framework of the project “New Approaches in Harm Reduction and Practices”, financially supported by the European Commission and Open Society Foundations.

The overall objective of this project was to expand the knowledge-base about drug use patterns and innovative harm reduction policies and practices in respect of the three following problematic dimensions faced by stakeholders involved in the field of drugs in Europe:

1. The increased use of plant-based NPS without the requisite knowledge to reduce the risk of harm
2. A persistent illicit cannabis market in the EU and
3. The impact on the effectiveness of drug policies of austerity measures affecting health and social services, particularly in Southern Europe.

The common long-term goal set was the reduction of harmful consumption of drugs and the contribution to more effective EU drug policy interventions.

In this context, “Diogenis”, focused on point (3) and implemented activities that examined “Treatment and Harm Reduction Services in the context of the economic crisis; developments and challenges” with the aim to provide knowledge about the developments and challenges concerning treatment and harm reduction services in the context of the economic crisis and to examine possibilities, which can guarantee the continuity and further development of services.

The basic aim of these national dialogue meetings was to bring together stakeholders (representatives of the government, policy makers, civil society, researchers and experts) involved in the drugs’ field: (1) to discuss ways of implementation of the proposals and recommendations as resulted (a) by the related research project “Economic Crisis and Drug Policy in South and Southeast Europe, developments and challenges: views of policy makers, practitioners, drug users and NGOs about the consequences of the economic crisis for the health and social services and the measures needed to tackle existing and future problems” and (b) the Mediterranean/Southeast European conference that took place from 19-21 October 2017 in Cyprus, (2) create opportunities for implementation of consistent and effective treatment and harm reduction initiatives and (3) exchange good practices of cooperation between governmental and non-governmental actors in the field of drugs.



## National Dialogue Meeting: Athens, Greece

27.3.2018

On 27th of March 2018, the 1<sup>st</sup> national dialogue meeting, organized by ‘Diogenis’ took place in Athens, Greece. The aim of the dialogue, entitled **“Drug Policy: everyday practice and challenges for a coherent and effective policy”**, was to discuss recent developments at international and national level, as well as the conditions prevailing in the last 5 years in Athens with regard to the use of psychoactive substances, in particular: **(a)** briefing on the work and results of the recent Commission on Narcotic Drugs that took place on 12-16 March 2018 in Vienna; **(b)** information around the available harm reduction services and interventions for active users of substances in our city; **(c)** the latest trends and recent developments on new psychoactive substances; **(d)** the particular problems faced by teenagers and young people who use psychoactive substances and their relationship with delinquency. **Our main objective in organizing and implementing this event, as well as other relevant initiatives and actions, is the comprehensive monitoring of the issues under discussion, the exchange of information and the dissemination of knowledge through the equitable and creative participation of all involved and interested parties.** The dialogue was attended by 30 participants, including representatives of the Ministry of Health, the Hellenic Organization Against Drugs “OKANA”, “KETHEA”, Athens Municipality, the National Focal Point of EMCDDA “EKTEPN”, NGO “Positive Voice”, NGO “PRAKSIS”, NGO “STEPS”, the Peer Network of Users of Psychoactive Substances “PeNUPS”, as well as university students and journalists.

The dialogue opened by Mrs. Papadimitriou Theodora, Special Advisor to the Mayor of Athens on Social Policy and Mr. Koutrouvidis Panagiotis, special associate of the Secretary of the Ministry of Health for the treatment of dependencies.



Mr. Koutrouvidis pointed out that the design of a national drug policy is one of the main priorities of the Ministry of Health, stressing the need for a prompt preparation of a national strategy and a national action plan on drugs.

In addition, it was emphasized that the Ministry of Health recognizes the significant experience, know-how and contribution of the civil society organizations through their multi-annual action in the field of psychoactive substances.



The first session of the dialogue started with Mr. Apostolou (Diogenis' Director) and Mrs. Galinaki Sofia (Diogenis' Advocacy Officer), who informed participants on the latest international developments and more specifically on the conclusions of the 61th Commission on Narcotic Drugs, that took place only some days ago in Vienna. All resolutions, as well as the whole process of the discussion and drafting of the resolutions by the Committee of the Whole-CoW until their adoption from the plenary session of the CND and some very important side-events were described. Participants were briefed on the content, weaknesses, problematic and positive points of the resolutions, the innovations introduced and the "agreed language" of the UN.

**After this presentation, there was an extensive dialogue on the findings of the 61st CND, on the criteria upon which our country is being officially represented, the challenges and obstacles created by the lack of a national drug strategy and action plan, and the inadequate information from the relevant state authorities with regard to international developments and their integration into the Greek reality by the state and the other competent authorities.**

The second session, entitled **“Interventions for active drug users in the streets of Athens: the experience of the past 5 years”** started with Mrs. Lagakou, representative of OKANA, who presented important information and data on the actions implemented by the organization outside the structures through the service of "street work" and "outreach work". Over the last 5 years 442.450 syringes have been distributed to injecting drug users. An average of 1500 people per year is served in syringe distribution service. Additionally, during the period 2013-2017, 664 outreach activities were carried out involving accompanying beneficiaries in public services, hospitals, prisons, police stations etc. The street work team is active in the following areas: Metaxourgio, Pedio Areos, Athens School of Law and Cultural Center, Varvakios - Theater Square.

The discussion continued with the presentation of Mr, Kissas Ioannis (from NGO PRAKSIS), who presented the activities of a mobile-bus service, but also described through his valuable experience, the current situation in the streets of Athens, the obstacles and challenges professionals and beneficiaries face and has raised major concerns for the responsible bodies. **The difficulty faced by people using psychoactive substances in their choice of treatment and more particularly the difficulty of accessing methadone in OKANA's OST units has been emphasized.** Also, important factors have been highlighted that prevent a large proportion of active users with severe health problems from accessing hospital care. **The provision of substitution during hospitalization is considered necessary to help users in seeking help, as well as adapting services to the different needs of the population (e.g. gender, age). For example, the design of special services for female users was proposed.**

Then, the valuable experience of street and outreach work and the difficult situation faced by both vulnerable populations and the professionals was presented to the participants by Mr. Smetopoulos Anastasios (Coordinator of NGO Steps). The inability to respond promptly to the complete absence of first-aid units in emergency situations involving psychoactive users is a daily occurrence in the streets of Athens. Direct access to services is available only during the day, so during the afternoon and evening hours people in need are completely cut off from all kinds of help and referral to services. The need to monitor the needs of users and the importance of bottom-up approach to design and operation were highlighted. The condition for any positive change is both the existence of political will and the activation of society as a whole.



The session closed with a presentation by Mr. Nikos Fitsialos (NGO Positive Voice), who described the current experience of street-work professionals, the needs arising from this everyday experience, as well as future challenges. **The focus of street-work should be to support and empower people in need, as most people in the streets know that there are therapeutic frameworks but for a variety of reasons they either find it difficult or they are not ready to approach them.** From 2013 to 2015, there is a large reduction in the number of syringes distributed and this can have very serious implications for a new HIV outbreak and other blood-borne infections among injecting drug users. Another need is the establishment of drug consumption rooms across different central points in Athens. **During the everyday practice people working in the streets realize the harsh situation and the only way to overcome the barriers is through sincere dialogue, self-criticism, networking and cooperation.**

The third and last session started with Mr. Konstantinos Kokkolis, from OKANA, who talked extensively about cannabis and synthetic cannabinoids and their characteristics, connected with the current demands of the black market and of the market of cannabis products for medical use. He, also, mentioned **the need to address on the issue of recreational use of cannabis individually and to inform users about what kind of cannabis they consume, since there are significant changes in the THC and CBD content of all forms of final product in recent years.**



The session closed with Mrs. Eleni Kerasiotou, from OKANA, who described the Direct Social Intervention Service that started in 2013, aiming to encourage young offenders (aged 13-24) using illegal substances to participate in a process of evaluation, mobilization, referral, and treatment, according to their individual needs. The aim of the program is to reduce participation in future drug use and related offending behaviors and provides information and links to all care services, through personalized services to new users and their families. At the same time, it is attempted to train Greek Police officers with the aim of improving the approach and addressing of new psychoactive substances users.

## National Dialogue Meeting: Sofia, Bulgaria

17.04.2018

On 17<sup>th</sup> of April 2018, the 2<sup>nd</sup> national dialogue meeting, organized by ‘Diogenis’ took place in Sofia, Bulgaria. Despite the invitations addressed to the majority of stakeholders in Bulgaria, only two civil society organizations were represented at the meeting, possibly reflecting – as verified also by the participants – the **low level of engagement of competent authorities and organizations in the field of drugs, especially during the last years**. NGO Initiative for Health Foundation was represented by Mrs. Lyubenova Anna and NGO Center for Humane Policies was represented by Mrs. Yuliua Georgieva.

Mr. Nikos Stergiou (Communications’ officer of Diogenis) opened the meeting with a warm welcome. Thanks were expressed to the participants, who accepted the invitation. Then, Mrs. Galinaki Sofia (Advocacy officer of Diogenis) presented the research from the research project regarding Bulgaria, as well as the main conclusions of the Mediterrean/South East European Conference. These findings formed the basis of the discussion and gave the participants the opportunity to reflect on them and further discuss on their implications for their country.

Participants agreed that **the economic crisis itself neither was the reason for the reduction of financial resources in the field of drugs nor has affected the level of funding for drug related programs in the country**. With the exception of 2010, when the financial crisis hit the country, the period among 2007-2013 is being described as one of the best funded periods the national drug policy. However, since 2014 the funding had been rapidly reduced mainly to political reasons and more specifically the strong absence of political will to bring the issue of drugs high on the political agenda.

**Global fund support was essential for the implementation of harm reduction services, but due to government’s inability in preparing a transition mechanism, non-governmental organizations are dying**. Even if a mechanism would be implemented now, progress made would be lost and services would have to be born again from the beginning. **Though Bulgaria used to be a pioneer in the drug field during 1990s, the situation is getting worse in the last years**. Any progress made has been moved now to zero point, the access of people who use drugs in services has been significantly decreased or is completely impossible and harm reduction services are closing down. The vast majority of respected professionals working in the field of addictions left their positions and at the same time no investment is being made in recruiting new specialized personnel, in promoting education at societal level, in research and in bringing evidence-based best practices from abroad.

**The issue of NPS was brought up in the discussion as an important challenge**. More specically, the area of New Psychoactive Substances (NPS)- and especially synthetic cannabinoids - is a totally unexplored area, as most services are targeting traditional substances and patterns of use. No research regarding the risks and harms of NPS use has been implemented. Despite the fact that young people are overdosing, there are no official data for NPS prevalence and their burden on users. Moreover, except from one “illegal” drug checking service in a festival, there are no other such services throughout the country. **The**

**implementation of drug-checking services that will inform people regarding the quality and the real composition of the substances they use is of need, especially in times like these when the traditional heroin market is no longer a case.** Officially, zero deaths are recorder, mainly because doctors do not report the real cases. However, from anecdotal evidence coming from peers and professionals working in the streets, during the last year there have been 2-3 deaths. **Moreover, due to the fact that the mean age of initiation of drug use is becoming lower, the need for tailored services targeting under-aged users was pointed out several times throughout the dialogue meeting.**

In addition, the issue of open drug scenes and homeless people has to be effectively addressed: In Bulgaria, open drug scenes can mainly be identified close to one poor quality OST program and in isolated areas. A lot of homeless people use psychoactive substances as a way of surviving and unfortunately **there are no facilities to foster those people and give them access to a shelter due to their very high threshold and strict requirements (e.g. ID cards).**

**The level of peer involvement in drug policy was, also discussed:** in summer 2018, an effort to motivate people who use drugs in order to organize themselves was initiated and supported by NGO Center for Humane Policies in Sofia. The aim is to create a user's organization. Unfortunately, from one hand users themselves do not yet fully understand the necessity and importance of such mobilization and from the other hand they do not want to expose themselves and get in the front line due to the stigma they have experienced all these years.

**The meeting closed with some additional recommendations for future implementation, that civil society organizations in the region should jointly address and advocate for.** In this spirit, the need for synergy between different opinions and approaches in the field of drugs with the aim to find a common position in addressing the problematic areas seems of utmost importance. One recommendation made was the adoption of one Canadian practice in the field of drug use prevention, where the system works in a very inclusive way and they seem to have very good results. In addition, there is a great need to talk about the role of civil society and the trust between organizations and the government. Non-governmental organizations are not recognized as important actors in the drug policy dialogue and implementation. This seems to be partly due to the reduced recognition of Harm Reduction approach in general in Bulgaria. In this direction it is crucial to advocate for inclusion and meaningful participation of civil society organizations as equal partners in the formulation, implementation and evaluation of national drug policy. Consequently, a recommendation on behalf of the participants in the dialogue was to create a civil society movement with the aim to change state's perceptions about non-governmental organizations and how their important knowledge and expertise in the field can be used in order to have better results following a more inclusive model of dealing with the drug phenomenon. Last but not least it was proposed that civil society organization could stress the need of evaluation on behalf of the European Commission regarding how national drug policies are being formulated and implemented and also whether and to what extent the European Drug Strategy and Action Plans are being followed at national level by EU member states.

## National Dialogue Meeting: Bucharest, Romania

19.04.2018

On 19th of October, 2018, organization Diogenis implemented the 3rd national dialogue meeting that took place in Bucharest, Romania. The meeting was hosted by our project partner ‘ALIAT’ and was attended by 11 participants from different backgrounds, reflecting a big variety of stakeholders. More specifically, our guests represented the following state agencies and non-governmental organizations: the National Anti-Drug Agency, NGO ‘ALIAT’, NGO ‘AWAKEN’, the Romanian Harm Reduction Network (RHRN), NGO ‘CARUSEL’, and NGO ‘ARAS’.



Discussion started with a very interesting discussion on research findings among civil society representatives, who **agreed that the economic crisis and the austerity measures imposed were not the main cause of the shortcomings in the area of drugs in Romania, rather a long term pattern of insufficiency political will and inaction on behalf of Romania decision makers.** Competent authorities and responsible service providers were proven ineffective: (1) to address the emerging and very dangerous NPS phenomenon, (2) to secure funding for Harm Reduction services, (3) to secure the needed human resources and expertise, (4) to issue adequate legal framework promoting treatment instead of punishment, (5) to allocate and spend the available resources already budgeted for Harm Reduction, (6) to fund treatment facilities for drug users and secure sufficient OST coverage, (7) to create a system through which NGOs will be subcontracted to provide services, (8) to protect agencies, like the National Agency against drugs and the National Agency for Child protection.

All the NGOs active in the field of drug use and harm reduction – the main providers of services – were also highly affected by the economic crisis. Their capabilities diminished, many historical programs were put on a hold, but managed to maintain their services, either from

own sources or Norwegian Funds or Global Fund. **Despite the pressure put on the government and the fact that solutions to maintain the continuity of services were found, no competent actions were taken by the authorities.**

Mr. Sorin Oprea, Head of the National Anti-Drug Agency, made a presentation in order to provide his insight on the current situation about ‘Drug Policy and Harm Reduction’ in Romania. The intervention started by expressing the **full commitment of the competent Romanian authorities in implementing the key objectives of the most recent UNGASS outcome document from 2016, and especially the first operational objective, which refers and partially define the harm reduction policy approach.**

As it concerns the drug situation: **Romania is positioned on the main route of heroin to Europe (component of the northern part of the traditional Balkan route), and also located on the main routes used by traffickers for different drugs: cannabis (from Spain), cocaine (from South America), synthetic drugs (from Western Europe, mainly the Netherlands) and NPS (from Asia). Romania continues to be among the European countries with the lowest drug consumption rates being below average for most of the drugs.** Cannabis recorded the most



significant increase lately, but still, Romania shows low prevalence of this type of use. Opioids, mainly injected, continue to be observed especially among the drug users in Bucharest. There are, also, increasing rates of use of other illegal drugs in recent years - ecstasy, amphetamine-type stimulants and, to a lesser extent, cocaine. In the last decade, there has been a change in patterns of drug use and a high-risk group of NPS users has emerged in Romania. The limited availability of adequate prevention measures might have contributed to the trend.

As far as it concerns the HIV situation: by 31 December 2017 – over 14.000 people living with HIV/AIDS were in active surveillance. More than 80% of them were in anti-retroviral treatment, indicating very good treatment coverage. Almost 1200 IDUs were diagnosed as HIV positive during 2007-2017 (8,5% from all People Living With HIV/AIDS). In 2012 – an HIV+ outbreak among PWID from Bucharest was declared (after the risk assessment conducted in November 2011 by the EMCDDA & ECDC). **Due to the synergic efforts undertaken by the**

**competent authorities and civil society the epidemic above mentioned is now on stabilization trend – under surveillance and control.**

In order to reduce the availability and use of the NPS and to limit the HIV infection spreading among IDUs populations in Romania, few main strategic methods were engaged: (a) monitoring, systematic surveillance and risk assessment, (b) prevention, emergency treatment and harm reduction interventions, (c) Control – legal responses on NPS, (d) International cooperation within the framework of the UN Narcotics Conventions & The Council Decision 2005/387/JHA of 10 May 2005.

Since November 2011, when the HIV outbreak among IDUs was declared, together authorities and civil society have made incredible efforts to sustain the harm-reduction services, in order to limit the extension of the above mentioned HIV outbreak. Thus: (1) about **1200 opioid substitution treatment slots/ yearly available** in Bucharest have been maintained, (2) specialized NGOs supported by the national and local authorities managed to distribute an average **1,5 mil. syringes/ year** since 2012 through the needle & syringes programs available (to an average of 4000 clients every year), (3) **scaling up the screening** for HIV&HVC both within the national surveillance system (Health Ministry) & needle/ syringes programs (supported by the NAA) was recorded (4) technical coordination capacity was increased by **setting up an informal group of consultation** of national harm-reductions experts (GIRRAD), (5) new dedicated measures of harm-reduction (syringe vending machines, consumption rooms) were mentioned within the framework of the National Antidrug Strategy (2013-2020), (6) approaching treatment as prevention philosophy, all **HIV infected IDUs were registered in ARV ( low adherence percentages – less than 20%)**.

**The discussion ended with some important recommendations for immediate action:**

- Promote dialogue with the aim to establish effective strategies, appropriate measures and financial sustainability
- Shift the focus of drug policy on prevention instead of punishment
- Establishment of legal framework that will enable non-governmental organizations to get state funding
- The National Anti-Drug Agency should focus more on health and less on law enforcement
- Ensure free access to public health care system for disadvantaged social groups (e.g. homeless people)
- Finance non-governmental organizations to screen for tuberculosis, HIV and hepatitis C
- Decriminalize drug use
- Create adapted places for people who use drugs in public hospitals, where OST can be used
- Establish free of charge services for people who use drugs

## National Dialogue Meeting: Nicosia, Cyprus

30.05.2018

On 30th of May 2018, the 4<sup>th</sup> national dialogue meeting, organized by ‘Diogenis’ took place in Nicosia, Cyprus. The meeting was attended participants from different backgrounds, representing state agencies, authorities and civil society organizations. More specifically present were: Mrs. Chatziioannou Anna (Mental Health Nurse, Psychotherapist -Direct Access and Harm Reduction Center ‘STOCHOS’), Mr. Georgiou Maximos (Nurse from Harm Reduction Center “STOCHOS”), Dr. Samartzis Lambros (Psychiatrist, Ministry of Health), Mrs. Zarouna Elena (Psychologist, Addiction Counselor- KENTHEA), Mrs. Kazamia Eleutheria (counseling center ‘APOFASIZO’), Mrs. Zoe Kakota (AIDS Solidarity Movement- Cyprus) and Mrs. Ioanna Giasemi (Cyprus’ National Addictions Authority).



Mr. Nikos Stergiou (Communications’ officer of Diogenis) opened the meeting with a warm welcome. Thanks were expressed to the participants, who accepted the invitation. Then, Mrs. Galinaki Sofia (Advocacy officer of Diogenis) presented the results from the research project regarding Cyprus, as well as the main conclusions of the Mediterranean/South East European Conference. These findings as formed the basis of the discussion and gave the participants the

opportunity to reflect on them and further discuss on their implications for their country. Moreover, stakeholders present at the meeting had prepared presentations in order to talk about the work of their organization, the current situation in the country and make recommendations for future action in the field of drugs and harm reduction.

The first treatment services in Cyprus began to operate in 1991, when 4 beds in a general's hospital psychiatric clinic were detached and used for the treatment of both legal and illegal substances, mainly for alcohol and heroin – the beginning for the development of treatment services in Cyprus. These were mainly abstinence-oriented programs, but since then there have been many changes in the direction of harm reduction:

- Increased accessibility and retention in treatment
- Increase in harm reduction approaches
- Modifying behavioral approaches (reduction of severity) and use of positive reinforcement (positive reinforcement, not punishments).
- Use of evidence-based approaches replaced past alternative and anti-psychiatric interventions

Dr. Samartzis Lambros (Psychiatrist, Ministry of Health), among others, described the economic framework within which health services are being developed in Cyprus. **The economic crisis left Cyprus with a lower per capita GDP and higher unemployment compared to the period before the crisis.** Cyprus, now, has higher unemployment than the European average, while before the crisis had lower unemployment rates than the European average. **Given that the economic stress is one of the main predisposing factors of mental disorders and, therefore, substance dependencies, it can be easily understood that crisis did not had only economic but also social consequences.**

**The insufficient financing of the healthcare systems adds to these consequences has been, also, proven that affects patients' prognosis.** Moreover, **reduction of public budget in the health sector and direct cuts in the available funds cuts affected the availability and accessibility of both preventive and treatment services, including the cost of services targeted at vulnerable population groups, such as PWUD and especially IDUs.** The services of NGOs have encountered problems due to cuts of funds. **The general picture in Cyprus is that despite the difficulties the work in the drugs field has not been interrupted.**

Regarding some important statistical data, one of the major concerns is the **'binge drinking'** phenomenon, which is one of the largest increases in Europe. 50% of 16-year-old students reported alcohol consumption of 5+ drinks on one occasion in the last month, significantly higher compared to the mean average of 35% in Europe. Since 2004, an increase has been noted in the number of total people in treatment (450people in 2004, 1286 in 2016). This increase was, also, attributed to the expansion of therapeutic services in Cyprus as well as to the adoption of a protocol of referral implemented by the Cypriot Drug Law Enforcement Unit (DLEU). Under this protocol, which is an early intervention measure, young people who are getting arrested for drug-related offenses are referred to treatment. Also, despite a decrease in the use of heroin, an increase in the use of oxycodone has been noted. The total number of problematic drug users in 2016 was 840. The HCV prevalence among PWUD is 43%, but it should be noted that the amount people getting tested is only the 25% of the total number of drug users, implying that the actual situation should be very different. Regarding HIV, there were no officially reported

cases. However, according to self-reported data 3 cases have been mentioned among PWID. The average number of drug-related deaths is 8 per year. **Cyprus is the last country in Europe in terms of the number of syringes distributed to drug users. For that reason, the National Addictions Authority in cooperation with the Ministry of Health, installed automatic machines where users can have access to safe use kits in all provinces. The goal of this project was to provide easy access to harm reduction kits with sterile equipment in order to reduce the risks associated to injecting drug use. One more positive development was the expansion of opioid substitution treatment in all provinces and within prisons. While in the past only those who were already in OST prior to their imprisonment could continue their treatment in prison, now PWUD in prisons can start OST if they wish to.**

Harm Reduction interventions to be promoted and implemented in the near future are:

- Take-home naloxone as a measure to prevent overdose deaths
- Rapid Diagnostic Test for Infectious Diseases in treatment centers in collaboration with the National AIDS Commission with the creation of a specific protocol
- Harm reduction measures for immigrants / asylum seekers
- Introduction of methadone as an alternative substitution substance

**During the meeting, representatives of Civil Society Organizations pointed out the need:** (a) for training targeted to first-line health care professionals and psychiatrists concerning addiction and the establishment of treatment protocols, in order for first-aid or psychiatric patients are better treated,

(b) to build on the experience and influence of NGOs and together with other services, who are underfunded and facing problems, to put pressure on ministries,

(c) raise community awareness regarding the CHEMSEX phenomenon, a field which remains completely unexplored in Cyprus.

**It should be ensured that the expenditure is intended for investments of proven effectiveness. If evidence based best practices are applied, money are saved for the state and the society, as the cost of public health and criminal justice system sector is being reduced.**

## National Dialogue Meeting: Torino, Italy

29.10.2018

On 29th of May 2018, the 5<sup>th</sup> national dialogue meeting, organized by ‘Diogenis’ took place in Torino, Italy with the support of the partner organization ‘Forum Droghe’. The meeting was attended by Mr. Giglio Angelo (ex coordinator of Harm Reduction programs- Public Drug Units ASL Torino), Mrs. De Bernardis Angela (coordinator of Public Drug Units ASL Torino), Mrs. Nini Teresa (PWUD Associations Isola di Arran and Harm Reduction worker), Mrs. Ombretta Turello (coordinator of Harm Reduction services of Public Drug Units ASL Alessandria) and Mrs. Ronconi Susanna (Forum Droghe).



Mr. Nikos Stergiou (Communications’ officer of Diogenis) opened the meeting with a warm welcome. Thanks were expressed to the participants, who accepted the invitation. Then, Mrs. Galinaki Sofia (Advocacy officer of Diogenis) presented the research from the research project regarding Italy, as well as the main conclusions of the Mediterrean/South East European Conference. Then a fruitful discussion took place, where participants expressed their ideas on the current situation, the challenges they have faced during the economic crisis, and made their recommendations for future advocacy work and action. The most important points emerged from this national dialogue meeting are summarized in the next paragraphs.

**Despite the fact that there is no official monitoring on the effects of the crisis and the responding mechanisms to the crisis, all participants agreed that the impact is real. Austerity policies really had a negative impact on health and social system, as resources (financial and human) were limited and at the same time the needs have been increased due to the ongoing impoverishment of people and especially the most vulnerable.** More specifically, from 2008 until today, the National Health Fund (FSN) has been steadily underfunded. In the drugs field at national level, a special national Drug Fund, established in 1990, was abolished in 2010, and the only funding is now represented by the regional health funds. The regionalisation implies also big differences in investments among different regions, and this means great differences in PWUDs life, in their rights to health and wellbeing. At the same time risks are growing because of the slow and inefficient reaction of the services to changes in

drug use patterns and market. For instance, in some cities **heroin market is changing, the quality of the drug is dramatically unstable, and there is an increasing in overdoses.**

The first services, which were cut were harm reduction programs (not included in LEA), above all the ones provided by third sector, while few ones provided by public sector were somehow more stable, even if affected by the blocking of workers turn over: in the last 6-8 years there has been cuts in the number of working days a week /hours a day in outreach /mobile interventions and drop in centers. Many harm reduction outreach interventions and low threshold services run by NGOs/third sector organizations, accept a mission open to work with other social groups (homeless, marginalized people, migrants, young people) to find new resources not to cut staff and working hours. This has a positive outcome in terms of networking, new competences, integrated interventions; but also a negative one, because harm reduction actions are no more the core of the and after all, it means much more work, for much more people, for less or the same amount of money

**Recommendations made by the participants of the national dialogue meeting, can be summarized as follows:**

- Invest in harm reduction, as it is cheaper, more effective and strategic in a drug use normalization context
- Address stigma and Invest in PWUDs competencies and skills by promoting in peer support and meaningful participation
- Invest in the role of social learning and social norms, by promoting drug education centres aimed not at “users” but at the general population, with the objective to make people able to have less risky behaviours [PWUD]
- Create tailored interventions for ageing drug users, providing health and social aid
- Design the new harm reduction LEA in a proper and effective way, to make it a tool for due health and social rights all over the country. Include the harm reduction LEA in the list of the objectives that every public drug department must achieve, so that the managers are encouraged to promote it
- Shift resources from outdated services to innovative and evidence based treatment and harm reduction services
- Defend the services system from cuts and improve harm reduction approach and make a more rational use of the current resources.
- Shift from law enforcement towards care and education

## National Dialogue Meeting: Lisbon, Portugal

31.10.2018

On 31st of October, 2018, organization Diogenis implemented the 6<sup>th</sup> and last national dialogue meeting that took place in Lisbon, Portugal. The meeting was hosted by our project partner ‘APDES’. The meeting was attended by 18 participants from different backgrounds, reflecting a big variety of stakeholders. More specifically, our guests represented the following agencies/organizations/authorities: CICAD, DICAD, the Lisbon City Council, NGO APDES, NGO CAT, NGO CASO, NGO CRESCER, NGO Doctors of the World, Portuguese Union of Drug users, Lisbon Municipal Police and the Civil Society Forum on HIV.

Mr. Nikos Stergiou (Communications’ officer of Diogenis) opened the meeting with a warm welcome and presented the general framework of the project. Thanks were expressed to the participants, who accepted the invitation. Then, Mrs. Galinaki Sofia (Advocacy officer of Diogenis) presented the research from the research project regarding Portugal, as well as the main conclusions of the Mediterranean/South East European Conference. Then participants provided their insight on the history of Portugal in the area of drugs, the current situation, challenges and barriers and recommendations for future action.



**Without doubt the crisis influenced Portugal at institutional level.** The Memorandum of understanding (MoU) between the Portuguese government and the European Commission (EC), the European Central Bank (ECB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) (the Troika) has led to the elimination of the Drugs and Drug addiction Institute (IDT) and its replacement by the “Intervention Service on Addictive Behaviours and

Dependencies” (SICAD). **This change has been seen as a negative consequence of the austerity policies.** “

**During the crisis state agencies had the possibility to maintain the same budget, but at the same time the needs of society were significantly increased.** Crisis had a huge and direct negative impact on the most vulnerable and especially in terms of poverty, with access to social benefits being reduced during the crisis and increasing unemployment rates. At the same time investments in human and financial resources in the ministry of health have been decreased. **As a result there are problems regarding the response time of competent authorities to the emerging needs.** For example, one of the biggest problems that the country faces is the inability to effectively address the needs of the aging heroin population, the alcohol related problems on homeless population and their exclusion from housing services and shelters, as there are specific criteria based on total abstinence. **Despite the difficulties during the crisis, Harm Reduction interventions helped significantly as it works with people who are completely separated from the health care and addiction structures. However, Harm Reduction still is an area with a lot of resilience, especially from people in the area of treatment and recovery and that should be resolved by sharing the idea that Harm Reduction can be part of treatment and recovery.**



Moreover, representatives from the municipal police stressed out the fact that **although the law decriminalized drug use, people still see this behavior as a crime due to the fact that police is dealing with drugs during the everyday life.** Lisbon municipal police follows a **non-discriminatory policing approach, which they are willing to share and provide related training to other municipal police departments.** In addition, they stated that they are allies in the efforts for the establishment of drug consumption rooms, expressed their will to help and cooperate on this initiative as they have the experience of what is currently happening in the streets being between the drug user and the citizen. One positive development mentioned was the plan to implement 3 drug consumption rooms, (two fixed units and one mobile), with the effective participation of peers.

**Recommendations for the next years, made by the participants can be summarized as follows:**

- Official/formal participation of civil society in the decision-making process. Permanent dialogue should be established at national level. There is a need to expand the experience of cooperation at micro-level that is already available to formal cooperation and participation in the design and formulation of drug policy at national level, including the participation of drug users in the development of programs.
- Provide homecare support and shelters for methadone users and PWUD
- Harm Reduction should be seen as a long-term service and not as short-term projects
- Increase the work on recreation drug use (including drug checking)
- Effectively address alcohol related problems
- Establish a balanced approach in terms of funding, human resources and service provision among all different pillars (prevention, harm reduction, treatment and social (re)integration)
- Need for naloxone open to distribution and take-home programs
- Address the stigma among professionals working in the field (healthcare, police and law enforcement agencies)

**At the end of the discussion, NGO ‘APDES’ made an announcement and invited all participants to the upcoming 26<sup>th</sup> Harm Reduction International Conference - HR19- that will be held in Porto, Portugal from 28 April to 1 May 2019. This year it has been estimated that more than 77 countries will participated. The slogan of the conference this year is “People Before Politics”.**

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