

DPNSEE activities during the coronavirus outbreak

Already on 25 and 26 February 2020, following the outbreak of COVID-19 in neighbouring Italy and the first case of the virus also reported in Croatia, the DPNSEE Board had on-line communications, including a few experts from inside the Network, on the threat of coronavirus outbreak in South East Europe. The Board expressed concern that the health systems may not have fully in their sight the key populations we are supporting (and people with substance use disorder, especially heroin users, are usually in a weak health conditions), that these populations, being side-lined in the community, may not be well informed about the threat and measures they should take to protect themselves and that our organisations, especially those who provide services to people who use drugs and other connected vulnerable groups should also play their role in overall efforts to fight the problems caused by this epidemic.

DPNSEE immediately sent a [Letter to member organisations](#) on 26 February to mobilise them to prepare for the coronavirus outbreak with brief instructions. This included advice to act in three directions:

1. **While the coronavirus is still a threat**, participate in calming the situation and avoiding panic which may occur, inform people we are supporting about the protective measures against the coronavirus and make all necessary steps internally to be prepared for possible dark scenarios.
2. **If COVID-19 cases appear in the country**, intensify communication and advising the key populations, activate full spectrum of protection measures for staff and establish close cooperation with authorities, especially national and local public health authority to advice on necessary steps.
3. **If we find ourselves locked in a quarantine area**, fully respect all necessary advices and make sure that our people are safe, but also offer services other than ordinary actions to support overall efforts of overcoming the critical situation.

As a regional network with a wealth of experience from around the region, we invited member organisations to share experiences, actions and results they achieve. We decided to actively communicate with our member organisations and publish news.

On 2 March 2020, DPNSEE published the [Public appeal to protect vulnerable groups from coronavirus COVID-19](#) in countries of the region to invite them to pay specific attention to vulnerable populations, which may remain invisible in situations when major efforts are needed for an effective response to the crisis. We invited governments to *"ensure that all individuals have the opportunity to remain healthy and educated. Alongside preparedness measures, countries must ensure efforts to achieve a truly inclusive universal health coverage grounded on rights-based laws, policies and procedures by prioritizing and protecting vulnerable groups"*.

The Appeal was translated into [Croatian](#), [Montenegrin](#) and [Serbian](#) and circulated across the region.

On 9 March DPNSSE sent a new letter encouraging member organisations to continue their work and three leaflets we prepared that may be of use when working with key populations and staff:

- Basic protective measures against the new coronavirus
- Basic protective measures against the new coronavirus for drug users and
- Basic protective measures against the new coronavirus for cannabis users

We offered support in translating and publishing the leaflets. Together with our member organisations Prevent and Re Generation, DPNSSE have prepared these [information in Serbian](#). We added *General harm reduction tips for people who use drugs* prepared by INPUD, *Instructions for people who take drugs snorting* and *people who go clubbing* prepared by Crew and *Instructions for sex workers* prepared by BesD. These leaflets were published both electronically and in paper and distributed to organisations across the country. The leaflets were also used in other countries of the region and later translated and published by Juventas and Cazas [in Montenegrin](#).

In Serbia, where the Network is formally registered and contributes to the civil society activities, we initiated a meeting that the Office for Combating Drugs of the Government of Serbia organised with institutions and civil society organisations. The [meeting was held on 13 March](#) with representatives of the Office, Ministry of Health, Special Hospital for Addictions and four civil society organisations.

We joined our member organisation Timok Youth Centre from Serbia in translating and publishing in Serbian the UNODC document [Predlozi u vezi sa lečenjem, negom i rehabilitacijom ljudi, korisnika droga u kontekstu pandemije COVID-19](#) (originally: [Suggestions about treatment, care and rehabilitation of people with drug use disorder in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic](#))" and three infographics on COVID-19 - HIV prevention, treatment, care and support for people who use drugs: [Uloga zajednice](#) (originally: [The role of the communities](#), pdf 612KB), [Saveti za korisnike](#) ([Active tips to share with clients](#), pdf 632KB) and [Saveti za pružaoce usluga](#) ([Advice for service providers](#), pdf 632KB).

Two **Board meetings** were held on-line since the outbreak of the epidemic. At the first meeting held on [26 March](#), the Board members shared information about the situation in their countries. The decision was taken to have voice calls with member organisations by countries to get a better insight into situation, problems and solutions to them. The Board supported installing of the DPNSSE Forum serving exchange between member organisations and invited to share information with our partners in Correlation Network and EHRA.

The **video calls** with member organisations were held in the next two weeks, to discuss with them about:

1. What is the coronavirus situation in your country regarding drug policy (especially how the officials treat our key populations)?
2. What happens with the treatment of the key populations and which are their most important problems
3. What is new with the drug supply and how the people who use drugs are dealing with it?
4. How are your organisations dealing with the situations, your staff and their protection and other problems?

The meeting held on 13 April was scheduled to discuss the current situation related to outbreak of the coronavirus in South East Europe and plan future steps. Based on the information we got through calls with member organisations, the Board concluded that it is time to make some conclusions and decisions about what we can do in the forthcoming period to help member organisations and ensure their sustainability after the crisis.

The Board decided to call an on-line **Conference on protection of vulnerable populations in South East Europe** for Thursday 23 April. Besides our members and other civil society organisations from the region and wider, we shall invite to the conference national drug agencies and health institutions, international organisations partners and donors. The conference would, if possible, be organised in partnership with UNODC, EMCDDA and The Office for Combating Drugs from Croatia (which is currently holding the EU presidency).

The agenda will include two items:

1. Overview of situation with coronavirus among vulnerable populations in South East Europe. For this agenda item, we shall prepare a comprehensive information about the situation and our work.
2. Proposed actions to ensure sustainability of services for key populations during and after the coronavirus epidemic. For this agenda item, we shall propose a draft list of actions and measures to discuss.

DPNSEE provided member organisations from Serbia Duga and Philanthropy with an amount of hygienic material and masks. Philanthropy opened the urgent [shelter for socially vulnerable homeless people](#) in Kragujevac for which we provided some clothes for users. To Duga, who Roma and other various vulnerable populations in the municipality of Šabac, we provided food which was distributed in 122 packages to 251 people.

The Belgrade Centre for Security Policy published a report on criminal activities in the Western Balkans during the COVID-19 outbreak - [Crime in the Western Balkans during the coronavirus - early findings](#). With information we received from our member organisations from around the region, DPNSEE provided significant contribution to the report section that deals with Narcotics, but also general comments and proposals for recommendations.

More about the activities of our member organisations is available from the [news we regularly update at our website](#) and on social media ([Facebook](#), [Instagram](#), [Twitter](#)).

The DPNSEE Office operates regularly, but a bit slower due to restrictions and regulations imposed by the Government of Serbia. Our administration and financial officer, who lives in Pančevo which is 25 km away, works from home.