

Definition of the problem and objectives of the project

Despite being almost unknown to institutions and professionals, a growing number of new synthetic drugs (from 41 in 2010 to 81 in 2013 - EMCDDA) is produced for the illegal market and they are widely available. Most of these substances are used in clubs and parties: Eurobarometer 2013 data reveals that 65% of respondents used NPS in recreational contexts in the last 12 months (Flash Eurobarometer 401-Young people&drugs). NPS have high health risks for both users and the general public: they can be toxic, addictive and produce long-term damages or adverse effects (V. Reding-Eu Justice Commissioner). For some people, the use of NPS is a choice, but not for everyone: many NPS employ groups of chemicals giving effects similar to those of controlled substances, but it is very difficult to recognise NPS without a screening instrument that can analyse the contents of a drug. Moreover, in 2013 more than a quarter of young people (29%) were not informed about the effects of the “legal highs” (Eurobarometer 2013).

Drug checking (hereinafter referred to as “DC”) is an integrated service that lets drug users to have their synthetic drugs analysed and receive counselling (TEDI Project, 2011); in nightlife contexts it has been shown to be useful at different levels: early detection of NPS, harm and risk reduction in drug users, knowledge improvement for service providers and policy makers (Hungerbuehler et al. 2011); however in most EU countries DC is not implemented. This happens because of different laws but also because of some prejudicial concerns: organizers of musical events are afraid that allowing DC could mean surrender to the idea that those contexts are connected with drug use while for some policy makers “formal” DC is supposed to increase drug use (Hungerbuehler et al. 2011). So, it seems necessary to develop assessments that can provide clarity around concerns and doubts about DC in nightlife contexts. Lastly, there is a lack of understanding about cultural factors that can influence NPS use and that can be useful to improve effective policies and interventions.

To sum up, there are 2 main needs to tackle: the first is to rapidly identify and assess NPS, by using specific screening instruments and then transmit the results to the European Early Warning System EWS (see below); the second is to improve awareness and knowledge about NPS among partygoers, professionals and policy makers. Promoting DC in nightlife contexts in the EU countries linked to the EWS and informing local service providers both on NPS and the results of DC seem to be the best way to meet the needs.

The objectives of this project are: to early identify NPS by implementing DC in nightlife contexts and outside them; to inform EWS about NPS found; to combine DC with prevention actions to make drug users aware about risks and effects of drugs, especially those related to NPS; to identify NPS consumption patterns, related meanings, cross-cultural differences and spread these information to professionals and service providers; to compare different strategies for implementing DC and good practices for pilot implementation that can be used in the EU countries where such testing is not applied yet.

The target group the project wants to reach and to act on is composed of recreational drug users and people attending clubs and parties where drugs are widely used. The choice of the target group is due to a higher prevalence of drug use and probably also of NPS among those partygoers, so they are deemed to be at risk more than other types of population.

A second target group is composed of professionals working in drug addiction services and policy makers: in order to improve effective interventions and policies, they need to be informed about NPS use and cultural factors that can influence it; since they are involved in prevention, treatment of addicts and policy construction to tackle drug related problems, they must have a good knowledge of NPS, especially those mostly used.

Objectives

The main objective is to provide the governments of the partners' countries and EU institutions with information about new psychoactive substances (NPS) in order to better identify the different typologies of these drugs and the consumption patterns, assess related risks, and set up more effective responses. In particular aims can be detailed as follows:

- to identify new psychoactive substances and inform the Early Warning System (EWS) about them;
- to improve awareness and knowledge of drugs and NPS, their risks and effects, among partygoers;
- to understand meanings and consumption patterns concerning NPS and related cross-cultural differences;
- to inform local and national drug service providers about NPS and cultural factors influencing drug consumption patterns;

- to create guidelines for a pilot implementation of drug checking and extend them to other European countries where it is not carried out yet.

Expected results

- increased knowledge about NPS among professionals and institutions/service providers
- increased effectiveness of prevention and harm reduction interventions
- increased knowledge and awareness about NPS among partygoers
- increased understanding of cultural aspects that encourage or limit NPS use
- improved drug checking procedures on technical aspects