



NEWS RELEASE from the EU drugs agency in Lisbon

THE WAY FORWARD FOR EU ACTION AGAINST DRUGS

EU drugs agency plays key role in evaluation

(10.5.2004, LISBON) Officials from the 25 European Union Member States meet in Dublin today to map the way forward for EU action against drugs post 2004. The conference prepares the ground for the December European Council, which is expected to approve a new EU drug strategy from 2005 onwards.

The Dublin conference is a key input into the new strategy. Another will be the final evaluation of the ongoing EU drug strategy and action plan (2000–2004), conducted by the European Commission with technical assistance from the EU drugs agency (EMCDDA) and Europol.

Coinciding with the conference, the EMCDDA releases today the latest edition in its policy briefing series *Drugs in focus*. This is dedicated to the evaluation exercise, results of which are due in October 2004.

Why is evaluation important?

Evaluation of actions and legal responses in the field of drugs has moved up the political agenda in recent years. According to today's briefing, some EU countries have launched 'vast programmes' to evaluate policy implementation as a means of identifying needs, improving planning and allocating resources more rationally.

Evaluation is also essential for the 'transparency and legitimacy of public action', says the paper, helping to hold the State accountable to its citizens for 'what it does, how it does it and the results it achieves'. In a field as controversial and complex as that of drugs, evaluation is a 'key tool in permitting an improvement in policy'.

A new priority

The first European action plan on drugs was adopted in 1990, but the first plan to be complemented by a strategy with targets mutually agreed by Member States is that covering the period 2000–2004. This is also the first to include a global evaluation exercise.

The ongoing evaluation looks at the extent to which priorities and actions set out in the strategy and plan are implemented. It also aims to throw light on how they impact the drug problem itself. To tackle these ambitious objectives, the European Commission, the EMCDDA and Europol have developed a set of evaluation tools. These include thematic papers and questionnaires sent to Member States and European institutions on actions implemented. Also central to the process is the 'snapshot'.

'Snapshot': innovative device to map progress and needs

Evaluating the effects of a particular policy on the drug problem is both technically and scientifically challenging.

To rise to this challenge, the EMCDDA and Europol have developed an information baseline or 'snapshot' offering an overview of the drug situation and policy measures at the outset of the current action plan (1999). This will be compared with a similar 'snapshot' at the close of the plan (2004), enabling trends between the two dates to be traced in line with the six EU targets (see 'Useful documents' below).

At the end of 2004, this tool will help answer questions such as: Has the recent prevalence of drug use among young people increased? Has there been an increase in drug seizures? Has there been an improvement in the availability of treatment? This information will provide, for the first time, a sound basis on which to define needs, efforts and priorities in the drugs field in the coming years, both at national and European level.

Speaking at the Dublin conference, **EMCDDA Chairman Marcel Reimen** stressed the 'essential role that information plays in evaluation'. 'There are no better means of shedding light on decision-making on drugs than by making available objective information and complementing it with the findings of evaluation', he said.

The EMCDDA's Scientific Committee has also underlined the importance of scientific evidence in formulating the new EU drug strategy and action plan. It notes the key role that national and EU information systems now play in monitoring the drug phenomenon and says it is crucial in future to set 'measurable targets' and use 'appropriate statistical and methodological tools'.

Evaluation must be developed at national level

Most actions having an impact on the drug situation are the sole competence of the EU Member States. Evaluation of the EU drug strategy and action plan will only be fully effective then if it draws on evaluations carried out nationally. Today's briefing urges that Member States 'develop their own evaluation capacities' with 'appropriate resources'.

Systems set up to routinely monitor the drug situation and policies play a major part in evaluation. Here the EMCDDA and its national focal points have made considerable progress in the last 10 years, now offering an overview of the drug phenomenon in Europe as well as in particular EU regions.

But these efforts must be sustained and data comparability improved, says the briefing, especially in the EU's new Member States where monitoring systems may not yet be fully in place. At stake here is the quality of our diagnosis of the drug situation and our ability to render action more effective.

Towards a new EU drug strategy and action plan

When European legislators set the objectives and targets of the new strategy and action plan they will have to take into account the results of the ongoing evaluation. The briefing states that conditions need to be created at the outset that are 'favourable to future evaluation'. Objectives will need to be 'coherent, realistic, clear and precise', and 'verifiable' through quantitative data ('indicators') and qualitative data ('descriptors'). Existing information systems will need to be considered and may be developed to monitor chosen priorities.

European legislators will also have to take into account the change in perspective brought about by EU enlargement. 'We are now looking at a Europe enlarged by 75 million inhabitants, a Europe with 25 different drug policies not 15', says **EMCDDA Director Georges Estievenart**. 'The current evaluation focuses only on the 15. Information on the drug situation, responses and policies adopted in the new Member States must now be collected to help diagnose the drug phenomenon in the enlarged EU. It will be on this condition that the new strategy and action plan can rise to the challenges that lie ahead'.

Notes for editors

Evaluation: A value judgement of a public intervention with reference to explicit criteria and standards.

Dublin conference: 'EU Strategy on Drugs: The Way Forward' (Irish Presidency, 10–11 May). The purpose of the conference is to contribute to the development of the new EU drug strategy. More available at <http://www.eu2004.ie>

Useful documents:

EU drug strategy (2000–2004) http://www.emcdda.eu.int/policy_law/eu/eu_actionplan.shtml#strat

EU action plan on drugs (2000–2004) and six EU targets http://www.emcdda.eu.int/policy_law/eu/eu_actionplan.shtml

Baseline 1999 ('Snapshot') <http://snapshot.emcdda.eu.int>