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Monitoring Europe's drug situation: tasks and organisation

The EMCDDA's founding regulation, recast in 2006, establishes the agency's tasks as providing the Community and its Member States with factual, objective, reliable and comparable information at European level concerning drugs, drug addiction and their consequences.

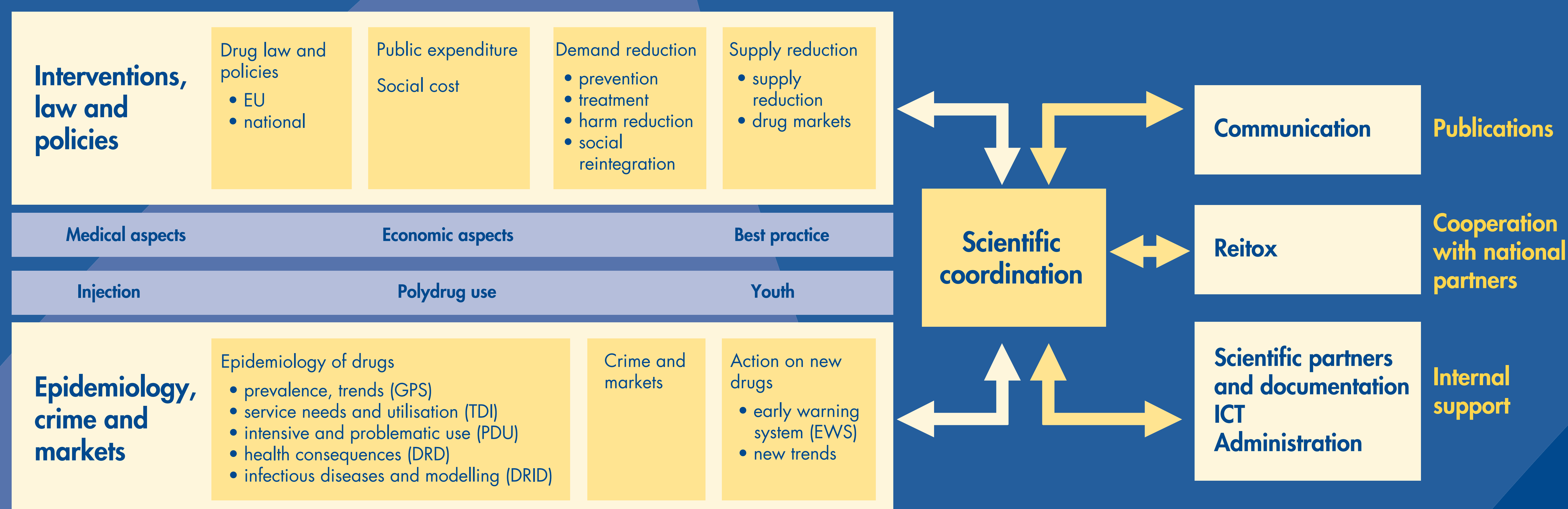
The regulation also sets priority areas where efforts are to be concentrated:

- monitoring the state of the drugs problem, using epidemiological and other indicators;
- monitoring emerging trends, in particular those involving polydrug use;
- monitoring solutions applied to drug-related problems;
- providing information on best practices and facilitating exchange on them;
- assessing the risks of new psychoactive substances and maintaining a rapid information system on their use, and new methods of use; and
- developing tools and instruments to help Member States monitor and evaluate their national policies and the Commission to monitor and evaluate European Union policies.

Monitoring drugs and drug addiction in Europe requires integrating and analysing information from different disciplines (pharmacological, public health and prevention, legislative, law enforcement, etc.). At managerial level the scientific work of the agency is divided into two scientific units:

- Epidemiology, crime and markets (EPI);
- Interventions, law and policies (RES).

Organisation of the Interventions, law and policies (RES) unit and the Epidemiology, crime and markets (EPI) unit



The Epidemiology, crime and markets (EPI) unit is responsible for describing the overall drug situation based on social surveys, public health and criminal justice data sets. In addition, activities conducted by the agency in support of the Council Decision on new psychoactive substances (Council Decision 2005/387/JHA) also fall under the responsibility of the unit. The five key epidemiological indicators and core data sets are the basis for quantitative reporting on the drug situation (<http://www.emcdda.europa.eu/themes/key-indicators>).

The Interventions, law and policies (RES) unit monitors responses to the drugs problem in the EU. In particular, it reports on the measures taken in the EU Member States to curb the problem of drugs and drug addiction at individual or social level, and it analyses the impact of national and Community strategies and their impact on the drug situation. Beyond describing the availability of interventions such as harm reduction, prevention or treatment, quality under the heading 'best practice' is a key element of work.

Although the organisation's scientific units can be seen as representing a simple split between looking at the situation on the one hand and responses on the other, in reality most analysis of policy importance requires a more transversal vision. The scientific work of the agency is increasingly organised around multidisciplinary topic-based working groups and cross-unit projects (e.g. treatment, supply reduction). Both units are reinforced by a statistician and team of data assistants and by scientific writers, who provide statistical, analytical and publishing support.

The Scientific coordination mechanism ensures that the work of the scientific units is resource efficient, complementary and focused on the priorities defined in the regulation and work programme. This mechanism helps organise the work of the two units, provides support to transversal activities and offers a platform for strategic discussion on scientific and institutional aspects. It also serves as an interface between the scientific units and the EMCDDA's other technical and support units such as the Scientific partners and documentation unit and the Communication unit.

Towards a more common European perspective on drugs

Since its creation, the EMCDDA has been developing a high-quality set of comparable data across European countries that allows both the combination of data from different information sources and identification of trends over time. In this respect it has also acted as a catalyst for methodological developments, improvements in standards and investment in data collection activities. In terms of the utility of the work at European institutional level, the common data collection approach has facilitated the development and assessment of European level coordination actions and in general facilitated the development of an evidence-based approach to drugs issues.

The EMCDDA works on the assumption that sound information is the key to an effective strategy on drugs. Although the agency cannot propose any kind of policy model, it does indirectly impact on decision-making through its analyses, instruments and standards. Moreover, the work of the EMCDDA can be seen in the context of greater European cooperation and coordination on drugs issues. By providing an information framework to support a general political call for evidence-based policymaking, the organisation is also part of an ongoing process that has seen a move towards a more common European perspective on drugs.