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Formal opinion of the Scientific Committee on the EMCDDA 2014 work programme

1. General overview

The Scientific Committee welcomes the 2014 EMCDDA work programme, the second within the 2013–15 strategy, which is based upon three transversal principles: relevant, timely and responsive analysis of the situation; deriving maximum value from activities and investments; and investing further in a customer-oriented approach for communicating. The Committee finds this work programme is in line with the 2006 recast EMCDDA Regulation and appropriate to the challenge of reporting on an evolving drug situation within the context of changing customer needs and expectations.

The Scientific Committee notes with concern the financial constraints that the EMCDDA is working under and fully supports the efforts to achieve clearer prioritisation of work by attributing different levels of priority to all proposed activities, as well as the holistic approach to reviewing the reporting burden placed on national focal points and rationalising the whole system. Recognising the difficult financial situation, the Scientific Committee would nevertheless strongly note the need to ensure that the scientific quality of the Centre's products should remain the central priority of the work programme and, therefore, where efficiencies or savings can be found in non-scientific areas they should be pursued.

Two important framework documents at EU level will impact on the 2014 work programme of the EMCDDA.

First, a new EU drugs action plan was adopted in 2013 for the period 2013–16. The Scientific Committee welcomes the significant role set out for the EMCDDA and for the Scientific Committee itself, and is ready to take additional steps to further support the implementation of this new action plan.

Second, the European Commission will propose a new legal framework on new psychoactive substances within the European Union, which if adopted will repeal and replace Council Decision 2005/387/JHA. The growth of the new drugs phenomenon that Europe has begun to face in the past few years is of grave concern to the Scientific Committee, as it not only brings new threats and challenges to public health and drug policy, but also to our ability to respond in a timely manner.

There are also other EU policy developments, such as the second phase of the EU policy cycle for organised and serious international crime, specifically its implementing strategic and operational plans, which may have implications for the work load of the EMCDDA, consequently challenging the current prioritisation of the work programme.

2. Specific comments

The areas of 'data collection, analysis and quality assurance' and 'monitoring and understanding drug use and problems' are key to the work of the EMCDDA. The Scientific Committee acknowledges the improvement of epidemiological data collection capacity and quality. The Committee also acknowledges improvements in the dissemination of information, namely on the public website and through the Statistical bulletin. The Committee welcomes the increased emphasis on interpreting

the key indicators' (KI) data, and the support for KI's expert networks and of their analytical capacity delivered through improved annual expert meetings. The Committee further encourages the EMCDDA to reinforce the collaboration with ESPAD. The Committee supports the exploration of new domains such as wastewater analysis, the understanding of market size and non-fatal health consequences of drug use, but notes that, given the finite resources, pursuing new areas will necessarily require the de-prioritisation of others. The Scientific Committee is happy to assist in this process.

The Scientific Committee supports the focus, in the area of demand reduction responses, placed on strengthening, revising and updating the EMCDDA public website, by making best practice information more usable through interactive tools and updating the response profiles. The Committee also welcomes the 'integrated system approach' to monitoring and reporting health and social responses. This will facilitate a more comprehensive understanding of how Member States are addressing drug problems. The EMCDDA should continue to develop a more integrated analysis of epidemiological and response data sets, as this is important for understanding the coverage and quality of services in Europe. While noting that some planned outputs in this area have been delayed or cancelled due to budgetary constraints, the Committee stresses the need to continue to focus on the identification and dissemination of best practice as one of the key priorities of the EMCDDA.

In the drug supply area, the Scientific Committee wishes to emphasise the importance of developing sound working processes between the stakeholders directly concerned — EMCDDA, Europol, national focal points, the law enforcement community and other relevant bodies. A major challenge in this area is to reconcile the different professional cultures and perspectives required to understand the complexity and dynamics of drug supply. A step-by-step approach is recommended here. The Committee underlines the need to follow up on the development of supply indicators, in particular those for which work has been advanced in 2013. There is generally a strong need to improve the strategic understanding of drug markets in Europe from a supply perspective. The Committee wishes also to emphasise the need to better understand drug supply reduction, including practical implementation, in the Member States, such as the law enforcement strategies against cannabis cultivation. The Committee again stresses that additional resources need to be devoted to this, if the expectations placed on the EMCDDA in this area to be successfully met.

The Scientific Committee notes with concern that the current Early warning system (EWS) is under stress, which is unlikely to lessen in the coming years. The Committee understands the needs to further develop the operational capacity of the EWS, particularly in the areas of detection and identification of new drugs, toxicovigilance, epidemiology and Internet monitoring. The Committee also notes that a significantly increased number of risk assessments may be required in 2014, under the current system, without a corresponding increase in the resources available. The Scientific Committee further notes that there is a need for better evidence to inform future risk assessments, for which there is insufficient resources either to commission or to conduct new studies, which may have a detrimental impact on the feasibility and quality of the system as a whole. The Committee also supports the planned activities to increase transversal work with other core areas of the EMCDDA's work, promote better coordination between the EWS and the forensic and toxicology laboratory networks, as well as further develop the EMCDDA 'trend-spotter' methodology. The Committee acknowledges that these plans will require considerable effort and investment by the EMCDDA in the redevelopment and adaptation of reporting and

monitoring tools and instruments, and may have an impact on other parts of the EMCDDA work programme.

The Scientific Committee welcomes planned activities on monitoring drug policies, such as exploring the role of drug policies at the local level, looking at the concept of value for money in the treatment area and the publication of a composite index of drug legislation.

The Scientific Committee notes the continued emphasis on the successful collaborations and synergies with well-established and acknowledged groups within the scientific community and European funded research projects. The Committee is fully supportive of these efforts and believes they will continue to create synergies and enhance opportunities for future collaboration, namely in the dissemination of scientific findings and the identification of research priorities.

The Scientific Committee notes the increased emphasis given to nurturing the national scientific networks that the EMCDDA's reporting ultimately depends upon. There are mutually beneficial ways the EMCDDA could take this forward in order to increase its capacity to maintain high quality outputs for example: 1) to enter into partnerships with universities and other research organisations whereby researchers could become involved in work with EMCDDA data, collaborating with EMCDDA scientific staff; and 2) to encourage collaboration between scientists in different Member States through the identification of relevant European research questions.

3. Conclusions

The Scientific Committee commends the EMCDDA on its 2014 work programme and expresses the Committee's full support and endorsement. It also notes the growing importance of the EMCDDA's work at a critical time for Europe. However, the Committee feels a strong dilemma. The 2014 work programme is necessarily ambitious, and considerable attention has been given to identifying appropriate priorities. Nonetheless, the Committee recognises that there is a limit to what prioritisation can achieve and, therefore, must warn the Member States (Management Board) and EU institutions about the critical and growing imbalance between the necessarily increasing demands and growing expectations placed upon the EMCDDA without matching resources.

8 November 2013