



Speech

- Occasion:** United Nations Commission on Narcotic Drugs special event
International day against drug abuse and illicit trafficking (26 June, Vienna)
- Speaker:** Alexis Goosdeel, EMCDDA Director
on behalf of the EMCDDA and Europol
- Title:** Closing remarks on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the world drug situation —
the European perspective
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Thank you Chairperson and colleagues,

I am pleased to provide some closing remarks to this CND special event commemorating the United Nations International day against drug abuse and illicit trafficking. We were privileged to hear the highlights from this year's *World Drug Report* and to take part in a rich, and highly relevant, discussion on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the world drug situation.

The EMCDDA would like to align itself with the comments of UNODC and, in particular, our close European partner — Europol. In the last three months, using an array of methods, we have been 'taking the pulse' of the impact of COVID-19 in three areas: drug use, drug services and drug markets.

Let me start by highlighting some of the implications of COVID-19 for people who use drugs.

I am very pleased that my Europol counterpart singled this issue out by stressing the implications for Europe's ageing cohort of opioid users who may be particularly vulnerable to COVID-19 — due to lifestyle factors or underlying chronic medical conditions. I would like to add that there is potentially a greater risk of opioid-related deaths (due to situations aggravated by the breathing difficulties caused by COVID-19) and the prospect of problems linked to sharing drug-using equipment.

It is vital to ensure that services are properly resourced, staff protection measures are in place and service planning is prioritised. Ensuring the ongoing provision of drug treatment services, including opioid substitution medications and other essential medicines to clients, is paramount.

Drug use behaviours, as well as poor socio-economic conditions and marginalisation, pose additional risks and, I wish to underline once more, the importance of targeted preventive measures in drug services, homeless shelters and prisons.

The current pandemic has had a disruptive impact on the drug phenomenon in Europe in multiple ways and some of the repercussions may be long-lasting. Timely and good quality data would be critical to meaningfully follow up continuing developments and to identify changes that may require an immediate policy, or operational, response.

The pandemic has revealed that we need to modernise our data collection, be able to produce evidence much faster and, very importantly, employ the new evidence to boost timely and proactive responses.

It has also demonstrated that the continuity of care for drug-related services could not always be guaranteed, which, in turn, has had negative consequences for health and social professionals and for clients from those services.

While the restrictions are gradually being lifted, it is very likely that some of the new practices will persist, as they may be more convenient for consumers and suppliers. An increase in the use of digital, communication and cyber-based technologies by drug trafficking organisations can be expected. As one-to-one encrypted communication services or social media apps are increasingly being used, monitoring and interdiction will become much more challenging. A key question here is whether more people will become used to a new form of purchasing their drugs and whether they will continue with it post COVID-19 lockdown.

Although it is too early to assess what will remain of the changes brought by the COVID-19 pandemic on drug markets and drug use in the European Union, we can expect that the pandemic had, and will continue to have, an impact on the main drivers of drug markets, which will require closer monitoring in the years to come.

The economic recession that we have in front of us is likely to be harmful in terms of mental and physical health and could result in a significant increase of substance use in the general population. It can be expected that it will amplify the negative consequences of the pandemic for people who are using drugs and for vulnerable groups in general.

Our European agencies are working closely together to strengthen our respective operational and strategic analysis capacity, and to build on our experience of quickly addressing new emerging needs during the COVID-19 pandemic to further adapt our respective business models. More than ever, our objective is to anticipate emerging threats even better and to inform policy, decision-making and operational responses. There is now a critical need to identify areas where rapid adaptations to operational responses and future policies are required.

Learning the lessons from COVID-19 to strengthen the EU's preparedness in the perspective of a possible new outbreak of the epidemic, the Directors of the EMCDDA, ECDC and Europol invite the EU institutions and the Member States:

- to strengthen rapid data collection, information exchange and intelligence, and analysis to inform immediate cross-border public health and security policy and operational responses;
- to integrate drug-related services into the essential health services at national level, and to provide adequate equipment and tools for frontline workers;
- to build on the positive results of changes and innovations that have been brought by the practitioners of drugs services in close cooperation with their clients;
- to maintain the funding and functioning of drug-related services in the post COVID-19 period;
- to support the development of new tools and methods that are needed to address the new operational and strategic challenges caused by changes in the drug market from production and trafficking to distribution and use;
- to strengthen cooperation and coordination between institutions and official authorities, both at European and at national level.

The way in which the different services and authorities have been working together in the European Union in the times of this pandemic has shown that the 'balanced approach' of the EU drugs policy has contributed to care and to protect, rather than to punish.