European Monitoring Centre
for Drugs and Drug Addiction

Formal opinion of the Scientific Committee on the EMCDDA 2021–23 single programming document, including the 2021 work programme ([1])

1. General overview

The Scientific Committee welcomes the single programming document (SPD) of the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA) for the period 2021–23. We are pleased that the document is in line with taking forward the long-term priorities defined by the EMCDDA Strategy 2025 and is consistent with the duties given to the EMCDDA in its regulation. We note that the SPD 2021-23 is a rolling document and therefore necessarily high-level in outlining the future work of the agency against a background of some uncertainty. Nonetheless, the document in our view provides a good structure for developing the necessary annual priorities for the agency's work over the next three years. In addition, the greater detail provided for the 2021 work programme includes both the agency's core tasks and some innovative new elements.

We note that the current version of this document was prepared before the COVID-19 pandemic and therefore the Scientific Committee would like to:

1. Congratulate the EMCDDA on the rapid reaction to the impact caused by COVID-19, both by adjusting to a new working approach and by the assessment performed on the early implications of COVID-19 for people who use drugs, drug service providers and drug markets;
2. Remind the EMCDDA that there will be an ongoing need to review, and where necessary revise, the SPD to reflect both the impact of the pandemic on the EMCDDA's work and to take into account new needs in this area. In particular, it will also be important to monitor the possible longer-term impact of COVID-19 on drug use, drug problems, service delivery and drug market operations.
3. Consider what lessons can be learnt from the experience of the current pandemic to inform how drug policies and responses, as well as the work of the agency, can be better prepared for possible future major disruptive events.

The Scientific Committee notes with concern that the agency's budget situation remains challenging. The implications of budget constraints and the unknown level of future funding are worrying and have the potential to negatively affect the core data collection work of the EMCDDA and the Reitox network. In this context, we note that a number of areas of work have already been adversely affected. There is a risk that some new data collection approaches may not be sustainable if they do not receive support, especially where they have not become established at national level.

([1]) This version of the formal opinion was drafted for the SPD 2021-23 sent for comments in February 2020. The Scientific Committee acknowledges that the issues around the COVID-19 pandemic imposed adjustments on the 2020 workplan which will probably also have implications for the 2021-23 period. The text of this formal opinion will be reviewed and, if necessary, updated if the SPD 2021-23 is substantially revised.

The possibility of continuing the support for the ESPAD project is also a concern during the period covered by this SPD. In addition to the budget available for the EMCDDA's work, a parallel concern exists that we may see further reductions in national investment in data collection and the work of national focal points. This would have a worrying impact on the EMCDDA and on the implementation of the tasks envisaged in this SPD.

2. Specific comments

The SPD for the period 2021–23 is based on the two pillars of EMCDDA core areas of work: 'Health' and 'Security', as defined in the EMCDDA Strategy 2025. In addition, four business drivers form the third main area of work, of which the 'scientific capacity' driver specifically concerns the Scientific Committee's areas of expertise.

In the main area of *Health* the Scientific Committee highlights the EMCDDA's capacity to identify and support the development of new sources and methods for data collection that represent increasingly reliable alternative and complementary approaches to survey data and traditional registry-based indicators. This is reflected in this SPD, where a number of innovative and novel data collection approaches are outlined. The Committee notes that rapid assessment and response methods may become more necessary as the drug situation diversifies and welcomes the inclusion of more innovative and timely methods in the EMCDDA's future work.

The Committee invites the EMCDDA to consider the need for further developing the conceptual framework around wastewater analysis and work to improve our understanding of the generalisability of findings. A possible partnership with the European Centre for Disease Control to scope the use of multi-parameter evidence synthesis for prevalence estimation may be worth considering here. The Committee also welcomes the increased collaboration between the EMCDDA and the network of European forensic toxicology laboratories.

Collating data from epidemiological surveys of drug use remains a key component of EMCDDA work. The Scientific Committee continues to view information at the population level as important but notes that drug use and drug problems differ across cultural groups and settings. Epidemiological surveys should therefore be extended to provide more granulated analysis where this is possible.

The Scientific Committee congratulates the EMCDDA on the exemplary functioning of the Early Warning System on new psychoactive substances and the synergies produced by close collaboration with WHO and UNODC in this area. Risk assessments should continue to be conducted in spite of current constraints.

The European Database on New Drugs is an extremely useful resource in terms of analytical and seizure data. Within the available resources, the Scientific Committee would encourage the EMCDDA to add available information on pharmacology/toxicology and dosing data where this is possible.

The Scientific Committee welcomes the new conceptual framework for data collection, which is planned to be developed by the end of the Roadmap 2020. Within the context of the EMCDDA mandate, the Committee would invite the EMCDDA to further explore the issue of non-therapeutic use of psychotropic medicines, including those not licenced for use in the EU.

The Scientific Committee appreciates the importance given to the provision of information on prevention, treatment and harm-reduction to support a wide range of stakeholders in the SPD. In this context, the Scientific Committee welcomes that the EMCDDA is exploring 'options for the certification of prevention programmes with a view to promoting high quality practice in this area'. Other opportunities exist in this area, including exploring how new e- and m-health options can be harnessed to support the delivery of interventions.

The SPD also addresses a number of important challenges in responding to drugs issues where the Committee believes the EMCDDA can add value by providing a European perspective. Areas of particular note include: 1) changing demographics and their implications on drug use and service provision; 2) the increasing importance of stimulants and the need to better understand effective treatment approaches in this area; 3) challenges in the cannabis area, including what constitutes effective interventions and the implications of new products; 4) the continuing challenge of promoting the elimination of hepatitis C; 5) the impact of stigma and the need for models of best practice to address it.

The Scientific Committee encourages the EMCDDA to continue to proactively inform the public policy debate and support the efforts of Member States to evaluate their drug strategies. The EMCDDA public website can be further developed as a pool of excellent national and European resources in this area.

In the main area of *Security*, the Scientific Committee would like to acknowledge the efforts made by the EMCDDA in the development of drug supply indicators and its full commitment to supporting the EMCDDA in this area of work. The Committee invites the EMCDDA to assess the impact the current situation will have on the related work and to consider alternative approaches where there is a risk that activities planned in the SPD will be negatively affected.

The Scientific Committee welcomes the work planned to improve the understanding of drug-related crime and invites the EMCDDA to further develop the scope and information sources used in this area. The Committee also notes the need for studies to be commissioned to address the information gaps identified in the 2019 European Drugs Markets Report.

The Scientific Committee notes that there is a concern over migration flows into the EU and the vulnerability of migrants to drug-related problems. In addition to public health concerns, from a security perspective, these groups are exceptionally vulnerable to organised crime groups that may exploit them as street-level sellers, couriers, and other high risk tasks and, therefore, further work in this area would be welcomed by the Committee.

The Scientific Committee recommends that the EMCDDA pays attention to the developments in the North American opioid epidemic linked to the use of synthetic opioids. Given the potential of these drugs to have serious negative implications for public health, this is an area to consider as a priority for increased vigilance.

The Scientific Committee welcomes the EMCDDA flagship publications planned for this period: the European Drug Report, the second edition of the Health and Social Responses to Drug Problems and the European Drug Market Report. The COVID-19 pandemic may provide an opportunity for the EMCDDA to develop online training for specific target-groups.

Whenever resources allow, the EMCDDA should continue to be involved in scientific cooperation projects and make full use of synergies with the scientific community, including partnerships with universities and research centres to receive PhD students in order to increase long-term, in-depth data analysis capacity. The Scientific Committee emphasises the crucial role played by the EMCDDA in shaping the programme of Lisbon Addictions and welcomes the preparatory work for the next conference that will take place under this SPD.

3. Conclusions

The Scientific Committee considers that the efficient implementation of previous SPDs has allowed the EMCDDA to be highly successful at anticipating and responding to the needs of its stakeholders on new trends and topics, such as the changes in cannabis policy and even the rapid assessment of early potential consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic for the drugs field.

The Scientific Committee is confident that, subject to the availability of adequate resources and within the restrictions currently posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, the EMCDDA will successfully implement its SPD for 2021–23, including the 2021 work programme, and expresses its full support and endorsement to it.