

BUILDING SOLIDARITY & MUTUAL SUPPORT

**NATIONAL HARM
REDUCTION NETWORKS**
POLICY
RECOMMENDATIONS



Correlation
European
Harm Reduction
Network

Many civil society organizations, such as various service providers and groups of people who use drugs, seek to shape the development of drug policy at both the national and international levels. The existence of networks brings numerous benefits and added value to the harm reduction field. Networks are best positioned to transmit to governments and decision makers information on work carried out by the organisations, including needs and challenges faced by people who use drugs.

Furthermore, the value that harm reduction networks offer to members lies in their ability to engage with other service providers. Simply by connecting colleagues with more expertise, experience and knowledge that offers valuable guidance, national harm reduction networks are able to support organizations in their early years. Continuous open dialogue about the changing realities of drug markets, consumption habits and possible infections or risky behavior contribute to the delivery of higher quality services that are better tailored to the needs of people who use drugs. Networks also typically have a good overview of their field, active actors, their skills and main interests. They are therefore perfectly positioned to identify experts, build bridges among stakeholders and set up groups for specific projects.

National harm reduction networks are represented in 17 European countries - with structures such as mission statements, steering committees, registered members, and annual work plans. This group includes formalized, informal, and hybrid networks. The key internal factors in operating a successful national harm reduction network include mutual trust and respect among members;

effective communication, including well-structured and focused meetings; dedicated management; clear and consistent commitment; and a clear mandate.

KEY FACTORS, BARRIERS AND FACILITATORS

Networks can also face a range of external factors that hinder or facilitate their operation and sustainability. The barriers to establishing and sustaining national harm reduction networks include unfavourable political climate around drug policy (e.g., prohibitionist, morality- and criminal justice-based approaches to drug use instead of evidence-based and health-focused policies); stigma and unfavourable public opinion; legal environment of civil society organisations and government-CSO relations, including shrinking space of CSOs; lack of capacity of organizational/ service provider members to dedicate additional time to the network's activities; and criminalization of drug use, which is considered as the most significant harm-inducing factor hindering the operation of harm reduction organizations and their networks.

On the other hand, however, harm reduction networks can tap into opportunities facilitating their functioning, such as favourable political climate; availability of funding (e.g., to fund capacity building activities); collaborative culture

in policymaking; or clear definition of harm reduction and its strong place in the national drug policy system. A mandate by an appropriate EU level authority (e.g., the European Commission) for civil society involvement would significantly facilitate the work of harm reduction networks. Such mandate would need to be accompanied by appropriate funding to avoid only symbolic significance and foster meaningful activities. A clear definition of harm reduction and clear guidelines for developing harm reduction policies might also be useful to advocate for at the EU level.

THE ROLE OF THE C-EHRN IN SUPPORTING THE NATIONAL HARM REDUCTION NETWORKS

According to the experts, membership in or relationship with the C-EHRN is highly valuable and brings a range of important advantages. With respect to further possible avenues to support national harm reduction networks, the following were emphasized:

- ➔ Developing a guide to support advocacy efforts in countries and regions where local organizations and networks lack capacity for creating tools, including, e.g., what to do to get through to political actors, what messages to use in contacts with them, etc.
- ➔ Publishing country comparisons of availability of data on specific issues and populations that can be used for advocacy purposes towards better monitoring and better-quality services.
- ➔ Monitoring and evaluation of national drug strategies to reveal within Europe differences in governments' approaches to drug policy.
- ➔ Providing a space for the transfer of knowledge and information-sharing (e.g., forum that is dedicated to the real-time exchange of practices, to mentoring in specific areas) to facilitate Correlation networks' members access to one another and mutual support.
- ➔ Advocate for standardized monitoring systems across EU member states.
- ➔ Connect with large funding bodies (e.g., Robert Carr Foundation) to explore key issues globally, and potentially facilitate partnerships for developing fundable projects.

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