



European Monitoring Centre
for Drugs and Drug Addiction



EUROPEAN
COMMISSION

First European conference on drug supply indicators

A joint initiative to develop sustainable options for monitoring drug markets, crime and supply reduction activities

20–22 October 2010, Brussels

KEY CONCLUSIONS

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2004

2005

2006

2007

2008

2009

2010

2011

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Objectives

The main goal of the First European conference on drug supply indicators was to launch the work needed to establish a set of technically sound and sustainable indicators for monitoring drug markets, crime and supply reduction for Europe. The event brought together for the first time a wide range of European and international experts to assess the current state of the art in this domain and develop a realistic strategy for moving forward in an area of importance for European drug policies. The conference was a joint venture between the European Commission (EC) and the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA) with the active involvement of Europol. It represented an important first step towards achieving the objectives stated in the EU Drugs Action Plan (2009–12) and supports both the conclusions of the Commission's recent paper on the way forward to improve key supply indicators and the EMCDDA in its work to fulfil its ongoing mandate to provide an overview of the European drug phenomenon.

The conference was organised around three main thematic areas: the drug market, the drug-crime nexus, and drug supply reduction. In practical terms, the conference provided an opportunity to assess the current state of the art in data availability and reporting tools; to identify structural and practical barriers to data collection and explore how they can be overcome; and to assess new approaches and potential monitoring options. In addition, the conference started a process geared towards achieving consensus on a roadmap for scaling up existing approaches and practices, and establishing the basis for a network of both operational and scientific experts that will guide the future conceptualisation and implementation of European drug supply indicators.

Key conclusions and the way forward

The conference was a unique event bringing together for the first time law enforcement officials, forensic scientists, academics, experts and data analysts from national and international institutions to discuss the way forward for monitoring drug supply in Europe. More than 120 invited participants — with different backgrounds, skills and perspectives — worked together during the three days of proceedings. It is expected that this first conference marks the starting point in a process of productive collaboration over the coming years.

There was agreement among participants on the pressing need to improve the knowledge base on drug supply issues in order to better design and target measures to fight against drug production and trafficking. This will be useful for policy-makers, including law enforcement strategic planning advisers. An important conclusion from the conference was that a considerable amount of data on drug supply is already being collected in a systematic way across the EU, and that the way forward is to build on what already exists — paying special attention to the potential for standardisation, extension and improvement of the data collection system(s) that are already in place. In terms of guiding principles to developments in drug supply indicators, there was agreement that the information providers must benefit from the information collected, routine data collection should be restricted to what is necessary and feasible rather than what would be ideal, and that there is a clear need for targeted research to broaden the understanding of the topic.

There was consensus among participants on the need to develop our understanding of supply reduction efforts and interventions. This is a key drug policy area, which receives a large amount of public funding, yet there exists a huge gap in the existing knowledge base. It is hoped that future work in this area will provide a useful source of trend information, help ensure that actions are well-targeted and effective, and allow the assessment of unintended consequences.

The development of a sound conceptual framework to monitor illicit drug supply in Europe will be an important place to start. It was recognised that the entire drug supply chain will need to be taken into consideration, as well as the fact that different countries will be affected by their own strategic and geographical position (producer/transit/consumer) on the supply chains for different substances. Experience has shown that developing a complete, coherent and standardised European information system based on key indicators will take time. It involves several steps, such as: needs assessment, conceptualisation, review of existing approaches, building of consensus, development and testing of standard instruments, development of implementation guidelines and, very importantly, the provision of some training to implement agreed standards. Working towards this would include the identification of key concepts, definition of information needs and priorities and the development of a new research agenda. This would be operationalised via a monitoring strategy and key indicators — which should be of a composite nature, building on and integrating existing monitoring approaches. The indicators will also need to be dynamic, allowing for the necessary adjustment to a constantly evolving drug supply phenomenon.

Both research and monitoring have important roles to play in terms of methodological approaches to our understanding of drug supply issues. The indicators will need to have both qualitative and quantitative components; complex models can help develop our understanding; and multi-indicator analysis will be essential. Particularly when focusing on drug markets, there will be a need to explore the integration of both supply and demand information.

There was general agreement, however, that there are insufficient data available regarding the characteristics and the functioning of the illicit drug market (supply side). Reasons for this situation include: the scarcity of information sources, the fact that law enforcement data are sometimes 'trapped' within agencies; issues of data sensitivity and confidentiality; and operational priorities may influence both what it is possible to collect and the data available. A further constraint relates to data comparability, where individual Member State legislation, criminal justice practices and political priorities all have an impact. It is essential that these challenges are fully acknowledged and appropriately addressed in each phase of indicator development.

There was consensus among the participants that the overall conceptual framework to monitor illicit drug supply in Europe should integrate three components: drug markets, drug-related crime and drug supply reduction. It was recognised that there are strong links and overlaps between these areas, but for practical efficiency it appears suitable to organise the work in this way. The conference discussions stressed that in each of these areas there is first and foremost a need to identify current good practice and build upon what already exists by scaling up, rationalising and standardising current approaches. There is also a need to go beyond this and complement it by developing innovative approaches, reviewing analytical needs, and establishing research priorities. The final objective is to bring all this together in a practically grounded roadmap with clear short, medium and long term objectives for monitoring in each of the three areas of markets, crime and supply reduction.

Data sets on drug purity, drug tablet contents and drug prices are essential to the understanding of drug markets. They need to be audited and reporting practices reviewed across Europe. It is now time to achieve a consensus on core data and methodological approaches in this area by developing a European standard instrument tailored to different levels of the market (from retail to wholesale and importation). The instrument should include guidelines on data recording and reporting as well as identify analytical issues and approaches. These activities will allow implementation issues, barriers and opportunities to be identified.

Discussions among the participants highlighted in addition a number of avenues to explore for improving our knowledge base of illicit drug markets in Europe. Forensic science was in particular recognised as an essential area to exploit further for the monitoring of issues such as adulterants and mixtures of psychoactive substances, but also as a reporting framework linked to early warning systems on drugs across Europe, and to explore for its capacity to develop a European centralised system for the synthesis of reference material and the collection and analysis of drug samples. Other areas for development include: production and trafficking in drug precursors and essential chemicals; demand-side approaches for sizing the market; methods for generating purity-adjusted price data; the potential utility of wastewater analysis; Internet as a monitoring tool; and understanding illicit drugs as competing commodities (e.g. different stimulants). Launching a trans-national study on drug trafficking in Europe was also suggested.

There was a consensus among the participants that drug-related crime is a large and complex issue: it may refer to a variety of criminal acts that are difficult to link together in a commonly agreed framework. A definition of the term drug-related crime will provide a conceptual framework for identifying the areas where measurement is possible, but it needs to be practical and realistic. It also needs to be linked to other criminal justice data sets and routine police reporting. It was suggested to broaden the definition to look at actors and positions of the different crimes in the drug supply chain.

Priorities for monitoring and research need to be established in the area of drugs and crime. Links between drug supply and organised crime and criminal hubs in Europe will need to be addressed. Intra-European production of illicit drugs is a major monitoring area where knowledge development is essential. Understanding the economic issues associated with the illicit drug trade is also a concern in Europe. Offences against drug legislation were acknowledged as an important component of drug supply monitoring, though it was also recognised that they are a direct indicator of law enforcement activity and priorities. The participants stressed the importance of reconciling the different data sets on drug law offences that are produced in Europe, and of agreeing on a common case definition. This will be a first step towards developing a European standard instrument, including guidelines for data collection and reporting. There are also areas that will likely be best addressed by research rather than through monitoring, for example the links between violence and drug supply activities, or the part of volume crime that may be attributed to illicit drugs.

Drug supply reduction is a broad, diverse and complex field where policing and criminal justice agencies play a central role. Drug policing is a multi-faceted activity involving a range of organisations, actors, methods and practices. However, care should be taken not to restrict supply reduction to drug law enforcement, and vice-versa. A clear conceptual framework of supply reduction is lacking, which hampers the overall understanding and consequently monitoring and evaluation of the area.

Drug supply reduction is also a wide and under-researched field. It is therefore essential to develop a set of priorities, at EU level, as to which sectors should be addressed first. There was consensus among the participants on initiating our work in this area by a mapping exercise with a view to producing a picture of drug supply reduction activities in Europe. The existence, role and practices of specialised drug units could be a starting point. Intra-European cooperation, how it is practically implemented and its benefits are another interesting issue. Some aspects in the field of alternative development may also be relevant for Europe. Discussions stressed that supply reduction activities are part of a bigger context in which global trends and developments need to be closely analysed for interpretation purposes.

Monitoring the supply of illicit drugs in Europe is a relatively new area and the constraints are numerous. Our ambitions need to be grounded in what is achievable. It is essential to differentiate between the information we 'need to know' and that it would be 'nice to know'. It is important to recognise that many things in this field are not best done — or simply cannot be done — at the European level. We will also need to be realistic, as data collection may not necessarily be seen as an essential task by operational staff who are already overburdened. The way forward is not to set up a single system, but to develop synergies, strengthen the links between existing data providers, and recognise different perspectives. A critical issue is that information collection has to be seen as valuable and important by those providing the information. This implies that the system should have practical utility for those who contribute to it and this issue needs to be taken into account when considering the outputs from any data collection exercise.

Charting the way forward, discussions have shown that a starting point will be to streamline existing routine data on drug supply, so that the comparability, reliability and completeness of these data sets are improved across Europe. Then, it will be necessary to assess the feasibility of obtaining data from new sources, and in some cases recognise the value of accessing information and knowledge which is 'trapped' within the current system, especially for trend identification. Strategies to set up more rapid information exchange mechanisms will be considered.

Where do we go next?

Work in the area of developing drug supply indicators has been anticipated in planning by the European Commission, Council, EMCDDA and Europol. The conference conclusions were presented at the November Horizontal Drug Group (HDG) meeting.

As noted in the EU Drugs Action Plan 2009–12, work on the following tasks will continue: to develop a definition of drug-related crime; to identify key indicators; and to establish a practical strategy to collect the necessary information to construct the indicators. Options will also be explored as to what extent available research funds can support developmental activities in this area, although it is recognised that funding options are limited.

In terms of concrete next steps, the work started at the conference will be taken forward in 2011 through the formation of three technical working groups reflecting the thematic areas addressed at the conference (markets, crime and supply reduction). These groups will be supported by the EMCDDA, and formally included in the 2011 work plan. Each group will assess the current state of play and, based on the conclusions noted above, develop a proposal for the adoption of a key indicator.

Each proposal will consist of three parts,

- a) a concept paper, which will provide the conceptual framework for the proposed tool, and include a discussion of methodological issues;
- b) a proposal for a key indicator, detailing scope and reporting categories;
- c) an implementation roadmap.

The result of this work will then be taken to a second consensus building conference in 2012 where the working groups' efforts will be critically reviewed and harmonised. At this meeting, any issues of overlap and consistency will be addressed. The conclusions of the 2012 meeting would form the basis for a proposal by the Commission to be considered by the Council on the introduction of key indicators on drug supply as envisaged by the current EU Drugs Action Plan.

European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction

First European conference on drug supply indicators — Key conclusions

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