European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction

Formal opinion of the Scientific Committee on the EMCDDA 2023–25 single programming document, including the 2023 work programme

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 2023–25. The document is in line with the long-term priorities defined by the EMCDDA Strategy 2025 and is consistent with the current mandate of the EMCDDA. As ever, it represents an ambitious programme of work that will be challenging to accomplish in the context of existing human and financial resources. The document also anticipates the considerable amount of preparatory work that will be needed to comply with the expected entry into force of the regulation and new mandate of the European Union Drugs Agency in 2024. We note that the current programming document explicitly recognises that the feasibility of non-essential tasks will need to be reviewed and some may be delayed or cancelled if necessary to ensure that the Centre is in a position to implement any revision made to its current regulation when the details of this become clear. We would support this position and highlight that, in the time that is available, this is likely to require the Centre to regularly review and adjust, where necessary, its planning, to ensure that activities essential to the preparation and implementation of the new regulation are given appropriate priority during the period covered by this document.

The Scientific Committee highlights the impressive adaptability of the EMCDDA in responding in a timely manner to emerging issues and the agency's capacity to produce rapid updates on topical issues. The lessons learnt from the experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic undoubtedly contributed to a greater preparedness in dealing with future challenges in this area. We see this reflected, for example, in the Centre's rapid preliminary assessment of the implications of the war in Ukraine on drug-related issues, such as the provision of drug treatment for those fleeing this crisis. We are pleased to note that imbedding this more reactive approach in the EMCDDA planning is evident in this planning document.

In this period of transition between the current EMCDDA mandate and the expected mandate of the European Union Drugs Agency, the Scientific Committee also emphasises the importance of reconceptualising how polydrug use impacts on the health, social and security area. In this context, we invite the EMCDDA to make full use of the Committee's 2021 position paper *Extending the EMCDDA's monitoring and reporting framework to cover the substance misuse topic and its consequences for European policies and responses in a more holistic manner.*

The Scientific Committee notes with concern that the implications of continued budget constraints may limit, particularly in this transition period, the capacity of the EMCDDA and the Reitox network to carry out necessary preparatory and developmental work. The Committee therefore reiterates the need to prioritise the allocation of resources to ensure that key expected results are delivered to high scientific standards while at the same time dedicating the necessary resources to preparatory activities for the entry into force of the expected new regulation. We also note that the EMCDDA will need to contribute to the evaluation of the EU Drugs Action Plan during this exceptionally challenging period.

2. Specific comments

The SPD for the period 2023–25 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 areas of expertise of the Scientific Committee.

The Scientific Committee welcomes the EMCDDA flagship publications planned for this period: the annual European Drug Report package and the fourth edition of the European Drug Markets Report.

The Scientific Committee also welcomes the foresight approach that has been increasingly used to inform the scientific work of the EMCDDA. This has created opportunities for the EMCDDA to further improve its flexibility and preparedness to rapidly react to uncertainty and disruption. Whenever resources allow, the EMCDDA should continue to develop and refine this approach, including via the use of scenario exploration around how international crises may impact on drug markets and on the health and social consequences of drug use.

The Scientific Committee emphasises the crucial role played by the EMCDDA in shaping the programme of the European Conference on Addictive Behaviours and Dependencies – Lisbon Addictions. This conference is regarded internationally as one of the major global scientific meetings in this area and is now the biggest scientific conference in Europe on this topic. The Scientific Committee applauds the Centre on this remarkable achievement. The Committee also notes this opportunity for the agency to engage with the scientific community and welcomes the preparatory work for the fifth conference that will take place during the period covered by this SPD.

In the area of *Health,* the Scientific Committee welcomes the work of the EMCDDA around monitoring cannabis policies. The Committee considers this work to be highly relevant to informing the current and future debate on public health and drugs policy in Europe. It is important to acknowledge the need in this area to ensure that any changes introduced are supported by developed policy evaluation models – that will necessarily require the selection of appropriate outcome measures – and informed by the existence of robust baseline data. The Scientific Committee welcomes the EMCDDA's work in supporting deliberations in this area and believes this should remain a priority during the period covered by the SPD.

Mental health problems and comorbidities linked to drug use are key issues impacting on the quality and implementation of service provision in this area. The Scientific Committee suggests that the EMCDDA continues to explore the evidence base in this area, including considering the promotion of mental health in prevention, treatment and harm reduction interventions. In this context and where it is appropriate within its mandate, the Centre should also begin to consider the implications for drug policies and responses of developments in the use of psychedelic substances as treatment for mental disorders.

The Scientific Committee also encourages the EMCDDA to continue exploring methodological issues around the development of more timely and sensitive data collection tools, such as web surveys, and innovative service delivery options, such as e- and m-health tools.

The Scientific Committee highlights the importance of involving people with lived experience and invites the EMCDDA to consider options for further listening to the voices of those using drugs and of their families and communities. We note here the special need to consider those most socially vulnerable, who often face multiple challenges, which include exclusion and stigma. Acknowledging the special needs of women who use drugs, and the importance of facilitating the access of migrants/refugees who use drugs to treatment, are also important in this context.

The adolescent and young adult population merits special attention, especially when looking forward to the expected entry into force of the regulation and new mandate of the European Union Drugs Agency. This is a particularly vulnerable population, which has become more challenged by the aftermath of the COVID-19 related lockdowns and confinements.

In the area of *Security*, the Scientific Committee welcomes the ongoing work in the area to improve and further develop the core monitoring of the drug market and crime-related data. The Committee emphasises the need for higher visibility of the EMCDDA's efforts in this area and encourages the agency to further explore a) estimates on the market size and number of users; b) the option to widen the monitoring of drug-related homicides to include data and information on drug-related violence, including high-impact crime such as shootings and violence episodes in open scenes; c) the collection of data on cannabis production sites and d) exploring the use of new technologies to improve monitoring and reporting in this area.

The Scientific Committee also notes with concern that a possibility exists that changes in production and trafficking routes may occur linked to the war in Ukraine. We also note, with concern, that some drugs particularly linked with highly negative health and social outcomes, such as crack and fentanyl, may be becoming more available in Europe. The Committee recommends that the EMCDDA continues to closely monitor these and any similar developments.

The Scientific Committee highlights, within the context of the current and possible future mandate, the importance of the role of the EMCDDA in supporting the monitoring of the growing number of drug precursors. Where resources allow, the Committee invites the EMCDDA to begin to consider which precursors may be relevant for emerging substances in the drug-related market, possibly drawing lessons from the successful European Early Warning System on new psychoactive drugs.

3. Conclusions

The Scientific Committee compliments the EMCDDA on the successful implementation of the previous SPDs under challenging circumstances. The Committee expresses its full support and endorsement to the SPD for 2023–25, and to the detailed 2023 work programme. The Committee notes that the possible introduction of a new regulation and extended mandate will make the period covered by this SPD both particularly important and particularly challenging. In addition, the EMCDDA will continue to respond to an extremely pressing external environment, with the potential to further increase social and health inequalities among the most vulnerable populations.

We are confident, however, that with sufficient human and financial resources, supported by an agile management approach to ensure that key tasks are prioritised, the EMCDDA can be successful during this period in continuing to meet the ongoing critical information needs of its stakeholders, as well as undertaking the required preparatory work necessary to implement the changes that may be required if a new mandate as a new European Union Drugs Agency enters into force in 2024. We do note, however, that this is likely to require that some less critical activities included here may need to

be reviewed and possibly delayed or cancelled. Finally, while the future developments envisaged for the agency are exciting, they are likely to put considerable strain on both scientific and non-scientific staff during the period covered by this SPD. The Scientific Committee believes that the success of the Centre derives from its committed, talented and hard-working staff members. Supporting them through this period of potential change must also therefore be an important consideration and necessary to ensure that the outputs of the Centre during this period maintain the reputation of being both scientifically sound and policy relevant.