

The challenge of prevention in recreational settings. Evidence, approaches and recommendations from EU projects.

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The consumption of drugs in recreational settings is increasing in Europe and it is becoming a growing phenomenon especially among young people. The recreational settings, and in particular the night-life ones, represent the best places where to implement actions for preventing and reducing drug use, dependence and drug-related harms. While in other prevention contexts (i.e. school) many studies and research about the effectiveness of the programmes are available, the knowledge-base is not so developed regarding prevention in recreational settings. This for two main reasons: prevention in recreational settings is at the moment only translated into experimental actions, while prevention in traditional contexts like school, peer groups or local community is not; the traditional methodologies of epidemiological research adopted for the evaluation of prevention programmes are not applicable to these kinds of action, because it is not possible to have a stable sample during time (time-series). The project “Prevention of poly-drugs addiction and reduction of drug-related harms programs for young people in recreational settings”¹ financed by the Drug Prevention and Information Programme 2007-2013² of the European Commission proposed and developed by the ASL Bergamo in partnership with Synergia (IT), the University of St. Andrews (UK), the National Board of Health - MidWest Region (DK), the Eotvos Lorand University (HU) and Regione Lombardia (IT), aimed to fill the above mentioned

¹ <http://www.synergia-net.it/it/elenco-progetti-europei/prevention-of-poly-drugs-addiction-and-reduction-of-drug-related-harms-programs-for-young-people-in-recreational-settings-pre121-pe40.html>.

² http://ec.europa.eu/justice/anti-drugs/index_en.htm.

knowledge-gap through research and analysis actions promoted by an interdisciplinary transnational workgroup, in order to improve the knowledge base and the exchange of information about the prevention and reduction of drug-related harms programs in recreational environments.

The development of the project has been structured through the implementation of the following main activities:

- Literature collection³, update and analysis and selection of quantitative information available from institutional sources, useful to estimate the phenomenon of addiction in each country and to develop an analytical report about the policies of prevention of poly-drugs use and reduction of drug-related harms targeted to young people in recreational settings⁴.
- Mapping of prevention programmes in recreational settings in three European contexts, promoted by local health authorities, social private sector organizations or other titled subjects.
- Definition of criteria for the identification of good practices: during two Focus Group (in each country) and a transnational coordination group, a common discussion was engaged in order to define a set of qualitative and quantitative indicators able to evaluate the effectiveness of the prevention programmes about which data have been collected.
- Identification of Good Practices and creation of an “Album” that aimed to exploit the creativity of local welfare (i.e. innovative services in recreational contexts, peer education, counselling, training activities to disco managers and to bouncers, “special” chill-out rooms, etc.) representing a catalogue of concrete solutions, useful to face common problems and situations, to improve the mutual learning in service networks and to supply to the planning authorities useful suggestions in order to propose new intervention schemes.

The key final results of such project have been represented primarily by the production of both a context analysis⁵ and an investigation concerning good implemented practices. The first study provides an overview of the present situation of the phenomenon of recreational consumption in three different European countries: Scotland, Italy and Denmark. The context report is structured in three different sections, one for each country, moreover every

³ http://www.synergia-net.it/uploads/attachment/transnational_1_1291135245.pdf.

⁴ <http://www.synergia-net.it/en/news/paper-selezionato-dalla-rivista-neuroscience-&-biobehavioral-reviews-147.html>.

⁵ http://www.synergia-net.it/uploads/attachment/1_1288880154.pdf.

section highlights the national epidemiological framework and drug use among people aged 15-34, the national addiction policy framework and the national addiction intervention programs and services. The second study, instead, has concerned the selection and analysis of 20 good practices⁶. The latter are represented by organizations that promoted and developed prevention projects, programmes or targeted services implemented in recreational and night contexts or actions targeted to so-called recreational consumers.

In addition to the above returned products, a set of indicators was also defined with the aim to evaluate the effectiveness of prevention projects in recreational settings. The set of indicators was divided into ten dimensions, which represent the main areas of analysis of an intervention program.

The published project final report sets out the key outcomes from the transnational investigations of interventions targeted in recreational settings and the resulting recommendations to inform best practice for future programme developers.

A comprehensive analysis of the 20 in-depth case studies investigated in Italy, Denmark and Scotland, identified two distinctive categories in the organization and delivery of interventions:

- The internal level or project level;
- The external level or contextual level.

The *internal level* is comprised of the techniques and approaches used during the implementation of prevention interventions. An analysis of these techniques and strategies determined a number of unique categories:

- "*informative approach*": the provision of generalized and/or specific information to patrons within recreational settings such as discos or pubs etc. The informative messages identified included the possible risks that may occur when consuming drugs, alcohol or becoming involved in other harmful behavior. The messages were delivered using a variety of methods including the use of tools like gadgets, leaflets, CDs/DVDs, information booths or poster points.

The effectiveness of information strategies was determined to be significantly influenced by the use of tailored messages developed in line with the specific needs of the identified target population. Moreover, the particular night life context should be reflected in the design process of information campaigns.

⁶ http://www.synergia-net.it/uploads/attachment/1_1288880179.pdf.

The delivery of educational resources within recreational settings presents a unique opportunity to increase knowledge and awareness on the negative effects of drug use and drug-related harms. In order to maximize participant engagement and the capacity to change behavioural messages should therefore not be “judgment or prescriptive oriented” but rather deliver accurate and appropriate informative messages which aim to prevent or “reduce” risky behaviors. By considering these factors within the development phase of informative interventions, programme developers can maximize knowledge of the harms associated with licit and illicit drugs amongst recreational consumers thereby reducing the incidence of harmful behaviours.

- An “*educational approach*” was most frequently adopted in the case studies reported. Educational interventions include an informative approach which is supplemented with a directive educational interaction delivered face-to-face or within group counseling sessions. The information points and the gadgets can be instruments that can facilitate the engagement and interaction with the target population for subsequent face-to-face meetings like individual or group counseling.

The counseling in discos or in the clubs can take the form of informal conversations and interviews with the recreational users that argue about personal problems or point of views about the nightlife or his/her consumption behaviour and an operator who stimulates the discussion just like a moderator of a focus group if the counseling involves a group of people. People involved are asked about their opinion, attitudes, perception towards a theme proposed directly to the users.

- *Environmental interventions* were also utilized in harm reduction strategies. These interventions were typically implemented in larger venues or dance events to address the risk factors which are reported to influence experience of harmful consequences of alcohol and/or drug consumption. The strategies employed within environmental interventions included the prevention of overcrowding in recreational locations, installment of adequate air conditioning and similar ventilation methodologies to prevent excessive temperatures on-site and the provision of free water and fruits to ensure patrons remained adequately hydrated. Chill out rooms were frequently introduced as environmental interventions which provided a zoned area for patrons to relax and take a break or rest within a suitable location. Chill out rooms are typically characterized by the presence of soft music, lowered air temperature, alcohol-free beverages or drinking water ensure patrons could remain hydrated.

The second level identified by the partnership is the *external level*. Independently from the type of actions made (internal level) to carry out effective prevention projects, as emerged from the case studies, a crucial element is the creation of a heterogeneous and well mixed working group.

The programme developers for recreational interventions identified the importance of including a range of personnel from different organizations to reflect the different employment roles and job responsibilities. There are also different institutional roles to take into account. These will include municipalities, local health authorities, police departments, volunteers, peers, responsible of the nightclubs, other professionals who work in night contexts. The latter for example are fundamental to convey positive messages and to facilitate the setting up of the interventions within the venues like chill out rooms, info points, first aid points.

The synergy among professionals that have different cultural approaches and different backgrounds, i.e. more educative and addressed to harm reduction for what regards the Local Health Authorities or more “repressive” for the Police, gives the opportunity to build prevention projects that seem to be more complete, coordinated and generally to be more effective. As reported by some experts interviewed, even if it is relevant to have a solid and heterogeneous working group for combining experience and know how, at the same time it is necessary that the different subjects retain their distinguished institutional role and activities. A clear example is that police departments have, in general, the task of controlling the blood alcohol content or the use of illegal substances in the light of their specific control and repressive role. On the other hand, the volunteers, the member of a local health authority, the nightclub manager are closer to the target group and their principal goal is to address in an appropriate way the messages related to the risks of drug use, and therefore would not want to convey a authoritarian role. So, the two figures (the police department and the health and social services/volunteers) have to work collaboratively with a good overall coordination but with differentiated duties and roles. At the same time, having an heterogeneous working group implies some difficulties in the overall management of the project and in the definition of the project plan due to the different approaches used (sociological research vs epidemiological research).

In the partnership building process another relevant aspect is the active involvement of the users, in this instance individuals patronizing recreational settings, both in groups and as individuals. User-involvement was evidenced in two distinct modes: as active organizers or in the needs-assessment process. The involvement of organized groups and youth associations can play an important role in supporting the planning of the interventions using

a participative approach. Alternatively, user engagement during the design phase e.g. in focus group sessions can establish a better understanding of the populations needs in terms of recreational consumption patterns or drug used behaviors thus enhancing the knowledge-base available to services or policy makers..

In terms of barriers to health promotion programmes targeted in recreational settings the most commonly reported compounding factor was duration of the project. The projects described in the case studies typically ran over a duration of 6-12 months financial constraints were often cited as the parameter preventing extension of the programme. The limited duration of the project was often determined to be, too short in order to establish a long term impact from the interventions implemented.

At national and local level, the financial resources addressed to prevention interventions or prevention projects are generally scarce. The lack of resources disposable for prevention interventions in recreational contexts minimizes the opportunities to have long lasting projects. The lack of funding, in addition to the length of the project, influences its potential impact.

Taking into account the elements derived from the case study analysis and summarized above, according to the partnership the European Commission and the other supra-national organizations could intervene on the theme of drug prevention at two different levels: politically and economically.

From a political point of view, in many Countries among social and health policies the area of prevention of drug and alcohol abuse has not the same “dignity” of other prevention areas where funding and visibility are much more consistent. Many occasions, even within local health services, the departments that specifically work in night-time and recreational contexts do not receive the same attention and resources.

Therefore, the European Commission could encourage Member States to recognize equal dignity to drug reduction intervention in night contexts and stimulate national and local authorities to invest politically, economically and socially in this direction.

Another point of weakness observed is the lack of significant evidence-based studies on impact evaluation of drug reduction interventions in recreational settings. In contrast to other contexts, like educational contexts where during the last years many research projects have been conducted and analysed. The effects of interventions in recreational contexts however are few and therefore a new important and innovative area of study. The traditional epidemiological approaches used for the project impact evaluation are only

applicable with great difficulty in recreational contexts due to the change of the sample over the duration of the project.

The project suggests to intervene in two ways: first by financing explorative research to remain up-to-date regarding new drugs and consumption styles and behaviors to set up appropriate projects well contextualized and, second to give financial support to develop new and more accurate methods for the impact evaluation of drug-reduction projects in recreational contexts.

Therefore, the project has outlined a theoretical set of indicators able to evaluate the effectiveness of actions organized to reduce drug abuse. These indicators will be an important and vital starting point for future activities. In detail, the list of indicators⁷ identified can be divided in ten dimensions representing the main concepts of the analysis of a prevention program:

- availability and appropriateness of the equipment and material;
- suitability of the personnel involved;
- comprehensiveness of the partnership;
- coordination capacity of the partnership;
- reachability;
- sustainability;
- appropriateness of the operational strategies;
- appropriateness of the mainstreaming and communication strategies;
- objective definition;
- evaluation.

Furthermore it is of the utmost importance to encourage and support the international exchange of good practices on this theme: transnational projects, such as this one guarantee the transferability and sharing at European level of skills and knowledge among professionals involved in the drug prevention field.

In this perspective an important synergy of exchange of experiences and results was established with the international initiative Healthy Nightlife Toolbox (HNT)⁸, namely an

⁷ http://www.synergia-net.it/uploads/attachment/pr004_transatio_1290606361.pdf.

⁸ <http://www.hnt-info.eu/default.aspx>.

organisation composed by a transnational group of partners. The operating working group involves the Trimbos Institute (ND), the Centre for Public Health at the Liverpool John Moores University (UK), the National Institute for Drug Prevention in Budapest (HU), The VAD association for alcohol and other drug problems (BE) and IREFREA from Palma de Mallorca (SP).

Since 2010 the organisation has been updating its website in order to collecting and providing to any stakeholder or simply interested individual/group a broad number of examples of direct interventions carried out by either national or local associations in the world addressing the issue at stake. Together with such material, the website contains also several databases with many published studies among the literature concerning the prevention from alcohol and drug abuse, with particular reference to the problems related to their consumption in recreational settings, to the issue of consumption by adolescents and to the harmful effects of assuming drugs and alcohol at the same time.

In particular, when searching for interventions in HNT intervention databases, it is possible to narrow the specific research following a system organized by subcategories that divides all the actions undertaken into different sections: pill-testing, education for nightlife users, community/multi-component interventions, law enforcement, environmental measures, medical and first aid services, policing and enforcement, legislative measures, drink driving interventions.

As just mentioned above, it is important to notice that the HNT primarily focuses on urban nightlife settings, especially parties, discotheques, bars, clubbing areas, and to some extent preloading locations and their attention is directed to the promotion of both a healthy and safe nightlife setting. Such dichotomous approach has been motivated by the following three reasons:

- alcohol and drug prevention not only influence the health of the user, but also his/her safety. The majority of aggressive incidents, for example, occur under influence of alcohol whether or not in combination with other drugs. Thus, preventing harmful alcohol use will affect both health and safety as a whole;
- in general, stakeholders are initially more motivated by safety because of the strong link with public order and/or economical interests;
- implementing measures or interventions concerning health promotion can have a positive or negative impact on the perception of safety and vice versa. Local stakeholders should consider both health and safety consequences of their decisions.

Moreover, the organisation has been investigating with particular interest the so-called “harm reduction approach”, assuming that in nightlife settings, where alcohol and drug use are present, the latter is the most realistic and effective method in communication with people going out and taking, indeed, alcohol and drugs, with respect to any prevention strategy targeting abstinence, which has therefore been considered ineffective given the context taken into account.

The harm reduction approach is defined as the reduction of hazards or damage caused by alcohol or drug use and it involves mainly two strategies:

- education about using as safely as possible (it is recommended that “don't use” is always mentioned as a safe use option);
- preventive measures in nightlife settings (these measures contribute to the health and safety of all clubbers whether they use drugs and alcohol or not).

In addition to the above considerations, an important strategy of the HNT is the use of interventions within an *integral approach*. Still according to HNT, scientific research indicates that such an approach, which is based on a community approach, could probably be more effective than the implementation of separate interventions.

In an integral prevention approach of risky substance use attention is given to:

- Problem analysis;
- Cooperation with important stakeholders like municipalities, pubs and clubs, party-organisers, health/addiction services, and police, creation of specific platform for managing all these initiatives;
- A variety of prevention interventions;
- Creating safe nightlife areas, and venues (healthy settings): clear house rules, good door policy, good ventilation and chill-out rooms;
- Rules and enforcement;
- Training bar staff (from doormen to managers) and other stakeholders;
- Education for nightlife visitors about decreasing the risks of drug and alcohol use.

Similarly to what stated with the project carried out by the ASL Bergamo, the HNT planning for creating healthy and safe nightlife settings put the accent on the key aspect of actively involving several parties such as local authorities, pub and club owners, clubbers, police, transport department, and prevention professionals. The inner idea is that fostering healthy settings approach demands cooperation between these parties and this starts with

creating commitment and gaining knowledge about the different tasks and interests of the parties.

To provide a couple of examples underlined by the HNT, the municipality, as an active role player, could be involved in the following duties: project coordination, approaching cooperation partners, finance, creating commitment of and cooperation between the departments of public order and safety, public health and welfare, facilitating prevention interventions in public places and making prevention part of the license policy; the event and parties organizers could deal with establishing and maintaining a healthy and safe nightlife environment, training and coaching bar staff, setting standard, providing first aid and adequately reporting incidents to emergency services. Meanwhile the police and licencing enforcers could execute traffic surveillances, enforce alcohol and drug legislation, arrange additional surveillances, make arrangements with participating bars and clubs about the course of action after reports and collaborate on scientific research on alcohol and drug prevention; the health professionals/addiction prevention professionals, instead, should, for instance, take charge of advising in the area of public health and coordinating with other public health themes, advising on prevention interventions, advising the municipality/project team on alcohol and drug prevention possibilities, pushing on research and handling contacts with other professionals in the field of addiction treatment.

Finally, in describing the organisation of a specific project plan, HNT notice how the adaptability of specific interventions or types of interventions significantly depends on laws, policies and the economical situation in a country, as well as on the available resources. Assuming this, the importance of having a constantly updated source where to look for examples of other interventions that, according to the aims and the budget, could be suitable for the case at stake is key provides users with an important helping tool. Thus, making adaptations to existing interventions, seeking for alternatives or finding support when developing his/her own intervention turn to be somehow facilitated.