Formal opinion of the Scientific Committee on the EMCDDA multiannual single programming document for the period 2025-2027

Overview

The Scientific Committee welcomes the single programming document (SPD) of the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA) for the period 2025-2027. We note that this is an exceptional year to conduct this exercise as the new European Union Drugs Agency (EUDA) will become operational in July 2024. This will mean that the mandate of the EMCDDA's current Scientific Committee will expire at this time, and a new Scientific Committee will be put in place to support the future activities of the EUDA. We also note that the ongoing implementation activities necessary for the launch of the new agency may mean that significant modifications will be made to the current draft SPD 2025-2027 before its ultimate formal adoption. Our comments are therefore framed to reflect this transitionary context.

The document is in line with the current EMCDDA Strategy 2025 – which is still in place during the first year of the period covered by this programming document. We note, however, that the current strategy will need to be reviewed to ensure that it remains fit for purpose in the context of the increased competences given to the new EUDA. This programming document also reflects the current organisational structure of the agency, which will also need to be reviewed to ensure it is in line with the needs of the new agency. The Committee would advise the agency that given the integrated and overlapping nature of many of the new tasks given to the EUDA in its new Regulation, it will be important to consider how any future organisational structure supports synergies and joined-up working approaches across the areas of work for the scientific teams.

While this is a challenging period, the Scientific Committee congratulates the EMCDDA for introducing activities into the SPD that will help establish the new competencies envisaged for the agency's future work and allow the EUDA to quickly start addressing the new responsibilities given to it. We also note, however, that the EUDA will necessarily address a wider set of scientific areas, and this will require some developmental work in order for new business areas and competences to become fully operational. We, therefore, acknowledge that while the programming document is appropriate for current needs, it is likely to require extensive review and adjustment in subsequent years to reflect the developing priorities of the new organisation.

The SPD document for the 2025-2027 period necessarily presents an ambitious programme of work. The new mandate of the EUDA provides the agency with greater resources and competences. Importantly, the agency will need to be able to be more proactive in identifying and responding to health and security threats. We think it will be particularly valuable for the agency to have the capacity to identify and address important knowledge gaps through studies and other appropriate follow-up measures. These competences are much needed, at the same time, however, the Scientific Committee is mindful of the importance of not forgetting the value provided by the agency's historical work programme. It is important, in our view, that new activities are complementary and build on the successful and internationally trusted scientific work that the former EMCDDA has accomplished since its foundation. It is particularly important in this context not to undermine in any way the utility of well-established (multi-)methodological approaches and time series of data that have proven value for informing and understanding the changing developments of the drug problems we face in Europe.

The Scientific Committee appreciates the developmental approach envisaged by the agency, which will be necessary to put in place the new technical competences as set out in the new mandate. Increasing capacity in the toxicological and forensic area is, for example, particularly needed, but it should be acknowledged that it will require time and investment to develop this area successfully. In this context, we also note with approval that the SPD envisages from the start to complement developmental activities with substantive projects that will provide value at both the European and national level. We believe this approach is a good one, as it will allow the agency to do the necessary technical work to create the methods and networks necessary for its future success, while at the same time providing value for the stakeholders of the new EUDA.

In our view, maintaining the EMCDDA's longstanding reputation for scientific rigour and impartial analysis will be of critical importance to ensuring the future success of the work of the EUDA. As some of the new competences given to the EUDA will require it to make recommendations for appropriate response measures, it is more important than ever to assure the impartiality, independence and scientific rigour of the agency's work. Efforts outlined in the SPD to create a more digital, inclusive and sustainable agency are also appreciated, as is the emphasis placed on creating new digital platforms to facilitate collaboration and enhance communication and stakeholder engagement. While welcoming developments in this area, the Scientific Committee reminds the agency of the need to maintain high scientific standards and to take a neutral and independent approach to the evaluation and reporting of evidence in all areas of its mandate.

The Committee notes that the tasks outlined in the proposal for a new regulation can be grouped under the general headings of monitoring, preparedness and competence development. These tasks cut across the agency's main areas of policy interest (health and security), and provide opportunities to address current and future challenges in these areas through an integrated work programme that recognises the shared policy objectives of actions in the drugs area. The Scientific Committee, therefore, encourages reducing further the segmentation of work addressing scientific issues in the health and security areas, within the general context of providing a more holistic understanding of costs and harms, and how these can best be mitigated or reduced by increasing overall preparedness and data-driven and evidence-based responses. We also note that while these policy areas remain conceptually distinct in the new Regulation, they will necessarily overlap with respect to the activities required for data collection, analysis and reporting. We, therefore, recommend that, at the scientific level, while recognising the need in some areas for specialisation and expertise, the organisation encourages synergy and integrated working practices across all its areas of technical competency.

While the robust monitoring of developments remains a key task for the agency, the Committee particularly welcomes the further development of European drug alert and threat assessment competences. These are complementary and, in some ways, overlapping tasks. Developmental activities in this area should build upon the lessons learnt from the agency's already established work in drug monitoring, rapid methods for data collection and early warning in the area of new psychoactive substances. A transdisciplinary, multi-method and integrated approach will be required, in our view, to ensure internal and external synergies and effective working practices.

Specific comments

The Scientific Committee acknowledges and appreciates the scientifically robust work programme outlined in the SPD 2025-2027 and recognises the strategic efforts made to uphold scientific independence during the transition to the new mandate and to actively involve the scientific community in the agency's work. The Committee expresses a keen interest in obtaining further insights into the planning process aimed at achieving these important goals. The strengthening of links with both European and international research centres through networking activities is especially welcomed, as this will allow the agency in the future to have greater insight into important global developments that may have significant implications for responding to drug problems in Europe.

Furthermore, the Scientific Committee notes the importance of including in the SPD cross-cutting topics that are necessary for the implementation of the EUDA's mandate. These topics include 1) training, education, dissemination and capacity building, with a focus on the valuable contribution that universities and academic institutions play in this area; 2) research, innovation and foresight, where the agency is given a new role in conducting studies, supporting drug-related research initiatives and identifying priorities; and 3) the evaluation of outcomes, where it is envisaged to increase the investment in developing sound methods and implementing studies to better understand the impact, intended or otherwise, of policies and practice in areas relevant to the agency's mandate.

In the main area of *Health,* the Scientific Committee welcomes the opportunities that the SPD 2025-2027 provides for the future in the domains of drug prevention, harm reduction, recovery and social integration and health monitoring. The Committee considers the European Prevention Curriculum an opportunity to expand and address the specific intervention needs of subgroups with distinct requirements, as well as to outline how the agency will effectively reach these groups. The Committee emphasises the importance of incorporating additional primary and secondary indicators pertaining to intervention and prevention programmes. Several members of the Scientific Committee encourage the EMCDDA to learn from the experience of people who use drugs and their communities. This approach aims to foster a comprehensive understanding of topics such as intergenerational drug use and polydrug use, trauma, co-morbidities, or specific populations such as refugees. By gaining insights into the communitie's perspective, stronger relationships can be forged, and a holistic approach to addressing challenges in this field can be achieved. The Committee also notes the need to give greater priority to the topic of rehabilitation and person-defined recovery, and suggests greater consideration should be given to exploring opportunities to gather data and address practice-related issues in this area.

The Committee supports and encourages the agency's plans to strengthen the EU Early Warning System on new psychoactive substances and to enhance further its monitoring, alert and risk assessment functions using the all-hazard approach.

In the main area of *Security*, the Scientific Committee appreciates the balance found and underscores the significance of recognising the importance of a newly established laboratory network to deliver good quality and timely forensic and toxicological information and its usefulness as an integral and complementary component within the drugs area.

Members of the Scientific Committee express appreciation for the agency's plans to continue improving its work in the area of drug-related crime and associated crimes, such as financial crimes, environmental crimes, corruption and violent crimes, including drug-related homicide

and their prevention. Furthermore, the Committee wishes to support the developmental work planned for enhancing the quality and coverage of all market indicators and encourages the agency to achieve rapid and substantial progress in these areas in order to further strengthen its comprehensive and up-to-date understanding of drug markets in Europe.

Moreover, the Committee notes the importance of developing new expertise and capacity in the monitoring and threat assessment of scheduled and emerging precursor chemicals used in the production of controlled drugs and new psychoactive substances.

In general, the Scientific Committee acknowledges and endorses the agency's adoption of the foresight approach and is pleased that this will now become a regular activity. The Committee suggests considering influential factors such as climate change, the growth of the global south and other noteworthy mega-trends when shaping future activities. The more detailed foresights exercise, especially on exploring the possible impact of new technologies, including artificial intelligence in both the health and security areas, is especially welcomed.

In addition, the Committee notes the new role given to the agency to report on research gaps and priorities, as well as supporting research collaborations through a new research database. We note that both of these tasks will require the development of a robust methodology and suggest that involving the future EUDA's Scientific Committee in developing the methods in these areas will be helpful.

Lastly, the members of the Scientific committee appreciate the agency's goal to enhance co-production, including the central role played by the national focal points and the ambition to work more closely with civil society organisations. Recognising the importance of promoting the work of the EMCDDA, members of the Scientific Committee also appreciate the investment proposed in the SPD for supporting the dissemination of EMCDDA products. The Committee also notes the need to do more, however, in monitoring the utilisation of EMCDDA data in scientific publications and policy documents.

Conclusions

The Scientific Committee endorses the SPD for 2025-2027 as a valuable framework that is appropriate to the efforts needed for the launch of the EUDA in mid-2024 and the efforts needed in subsequent years for the agency to fully fulfil the vision found in its new mandate. We do recognise, however, that with the launch of the EUDA in July 2024, it will be necessary to review and adapt over time both the content and form of the planning framework, as the needs of the work of new agency mature over the coming four-year period.

The Scientific Committee reminds the agency that independent and impartial analysis and ensuring scientific rigour in all aspects of its work will remain as important to the future work of the EUDA as they have been in the past to ensuring the success of the EMCDDA. We are optimistic that the future Scientific Committee will help ensure that scientific standards are maintained and wish them every success in supporting the new agency to successfully implement the ambitious programme of work found in this planning document.