

## Impact evaluation of European strategy on Spanish National Plan on Drugs and the role of civil society

### *Evaluación del impacto de la estrategia europea de adicciones en el Plan Nacional Sobre Drogas español según la sociedad civil*

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The European Drug Strategy (2013-2020) addressed the issues of illicit drugs, new psychoactive substances, the legal sale of alcohol, tobacco and medicines with addictive potential, and behavioural addictions, promoting coordination between EU member states and within individual national action plans (European Monitoring Centre for Drug Dependency and Addiction, 2017). Coordination is a way of ensuring that actions and policies are as reasonable and efficient as possible (O’Gorman, Quigley, Zobel & Moore, 2014); it provides an action framework to prevent potential duplication; it leverages and pools efforts; it reduces people’s care and treatment timelines (EMCDDA, 2017); it saves and maximises the use of resources (financial and human) and promotes significant levels of involvement for each of the organisations forming part of the Spanish National Plan on Drugs (PNSD, 2020). The strategic objectives of the national strategy include encouraging and promoting meaningful participation and engagement of civil society (scientific and professional associations, NGOs, social partners, neighbourhood associations and others), for the purpose of which these organisations were invited to join the Spanish Council on Drug and Other Addictions.

The interest of Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) in participating in policies on drugs and other addictive behaviours has been expressed in national and international

forums (O’Gorman et al., 2014). To this end, CSOs have proposed the participation of drug user organisations in national forums as well as international committees (Ernesto, 2017).

Commissioned by the *Civil Society Forum on Drugs*, a study was carried out to analyse the impact of the European Drugs Strategy (2013-2020) on the Spanish action plan on drugs, especially the role of CSOs in this impact, taking into account the perceived strengths and improvement proposals of CSOs. The study used a qualitative methodology (Flick, 2018) with an action research approach (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The instrument used for the analysis was a focus group as a primary source and a review of articles, reports and various studies as a secondary source. As a working strategy, participatory method research was proposed. The *Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research*, COREQ, report was used during the data gathering procedure (Tong, Sainsbury & Craig, 2007).

A discussion group technique was adopted using a panel of experts on addiction interventions. A group of individuals significantly involved in the subject were selected, all of them considered key contributors at the international level (Tiburcio & Kressel, 2011). The selection criteria were: being a member of a non-governmental organization; with influence in the national and international network; being active locally, nationally and internationally; having proven

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knowledge of the aspect in question (addiction intervention policies); and with at least 10 years' experience in the evolution of the problem.

Certain themes recurred in the discussion group, as in any type of meeting involving Spanish CSOs: funding, the coordination between public administrations and NGOs, the gap between plans and strategies and the realities of organizations in their day-to-day work, and the great distance from research to intervention (Belackova, Ritter, Shanahan, & Hughes, 2016). The need for institutional channels of communication between CSOs and the administration was expressed on several occasions. The formal structure of the Council allows the active participation of CSOs, but, as confirmed in the focus group, there is a gap between the proposed and real participation of NGOs in this forum, which has not maintained the original frequency of meetings and output. There is a very clear need for the Spanish Council on Drug and Other Addictions to act as a useful tool for connecting Spanish policies with the commitment of CSOs. Furthermore, CSOs propose that the inclusion of drug user organizations is necessary in formal forums to ensure the voice of those affected is heard. In conclusion, while it is true that the European Action Plan addresses relevant and essential issues and proposes a series of actions for change and improvement, in reality the theory has not been turned into practice but remains at an abstract level, especially in terms of harm reduction (Belackova et al., 2016). Likewise, the current focus of the debate on fighting drug use is still on intervention in the supply of drugs rather than in the demand for drugs, although it is the latter which would represent an advance in managing drug use, according to several studies (Korf, O'Gorman & Werse, 2017).

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## Conflict of interests

The authors declare no potential conflict of interest in relation to this article.

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