COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF RESEARCH INTO ILLICIT DRUGS ACROSS EUROPE (2010-2013)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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INTRODUCTION:

SCOPE AND OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This study forms part of the ERA-NET (European Area Network) cooperation project on Illicit Drugs (ERANID) funded by the European Union under the 7th Framework Programme and consisted in mapping the situation of the drug-related research in the six Eranid participating countries (Belgium, France, Italy, Netherlands, Portugal, United Kingdom) and at the European Commission level over the period 2010-2013.

The study had the following main objectives:

1) To provide a comparative analysis of national and EU drug-related research policy frameworks, funding mechanisms and current projects;

2) To highlight strengths and weaknesses of various national and EC approaches of drug-related research;

3) To make full use of the results of the comparative analysis in allowing sound recommendations with a focus on how remaining problems in research might be overcome so as to bridge identified gaps.

BACKGROUND

The study forms part of a series of works aiming at documenting evidence of the European drug-related research situation since the 1970's. Although they differ in coverage and scope one another, each of the findings set a baseline against which to appraise the progress made and the remaining weaknesses in drug-related research. The present study provides an analysis of the more recent progress and new developments identified. By doing so, the study aims at providing input for setting drug research priorities within the framework of the Eranid project.

METHODOLOGY

The study covers the period from 2010 to 2013. Both applied and basic research are included in the work with a special focus on human and social sciences.

Material

The analyses rely on data collected by questionnaires within the six ERANID participating countries. Key research organisations and scientists have been contacted through an online survey in order to gather information about the features of their ongoing drug related studies. The informants were asked to provide detailed information on the topics

addressed, the disciplines and partners involved, the mechanisms and the amount of funding of their project. Regarding EC funded projects, the same information was collected on the basis of dedicated web-pages and documentation.

In addition, key stakeholders among policy makers and funders have been contacted at national and EC level. The information provided regarding policy frameworks and funding programmes on drug-related research has been completed by a further data collection on the basis of relevant websites and databases online.

In the end, the number of projects included within the scope of the study is 369.

Number of research projects identified over 2010-2013

BE	FR	IT	NL	PT	UK	EC	Total
16	85	36	59	32	84	57	369

Definition and categorisation of drug-related research

The present study faced the challenge to define and categorise drug-related research already experienced in the past. In order to maintain consistency with previous works on that issue, the study follows on from the latest definition of research suggested by the EMCDDA in an attempt to bring together several potential approaches:

"*Drug-related research involves performing a study on illicit drugs, which may involve a range of disciplines, through the use of scientifically accepted methods and procedures, in order to test hypothesis or answer a specific question*".

Besides, the categorization of drug related research adopted is an extension of the seven categories defined by the EMCDDA with two more specific insights: policy responses have been sub-divided in four categories (prevention, treatment, harm reduction, law enforcement) and drug related crime issues have been added. Research categories adopted are:

1. Prevalence, incidence and patterns of drug use — this category includes (general and specific, including school) population surveys, estimates of problem drug use, studies on the characteristics of drug users or patterns of drug use;
2. Responses to the phenomenon: this category includes studies on public interventions implemented regarding both demand and supply reduction
   a. Prevention responses
   b. Treatment responses
   c. Harm reduction responses
   d. Law enforcement responses
3. Determinants of drug use — this category includes studies on risk and protective factors for drug use;
4. Consequences of drug use — this category includes studies on health, social and legal consequences of drug use;
5. Mechanisms of drug use and effects — this category includes neurobiological, pharmacological and behavioural studies, as well as research on the aetiology and developments of drug use;
6. Supply and markets — this category includes studies on market characteristics, such as the availability and purity of drugs;

7. Methodology issues — this category includes feasibility and validity studies on the implementation of EMCDDA indicators and comparisons between different methodologies.

OUTLINE OF THE STUDY

In order to meet the objectives assigned to the study, the analyses are conducted as follows:

1) Firstly, research rationales and main current research priorities which underpinned EU and national research initiatives are investigated. To that end, the work looks into drug policy frameworks. Highlighting common threads across the reporting countries and the EU, it puts light on the role recognised to the research and the gaps to bridge in terms of research impulse as far as needs and priorities are stated specifically in the current policy documents.

2) Secondly, the study focuses on fully dedicated funding schemes targeted to drugs research and other generic funding mechanisms which have allowed European researchers undertaking such projects (as far as data have been provided through data collection).

3) Thirdly, the authors consider drug-related research projects which have been supported by the European Commission and the funding institutions at national level over the period 2010-2013. This in-depth analysis puts a particular attention on the topics investigated, the disciplines involved, the scope and size of the projects as well as their funding.

4) Finally, relying on the results found and mindful of previous works on drug-related research, the authors emphasize major strengths and weaknesses of drug research within the scope of the Eranid project, as well as key gaps to address so as to accomplish further efforts in research in the field of illicit drugs.

MAJOR RESULTS: STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF DRUG RESEARCH IN THE ERANID PARTICIPATING COUNTRIES AND AT THE EC LEVEL

Drug research policy framework

Beyond national differences and specific features, the following are some essentials dimensions of drug research policy frameworks examined in the present report.

Drug research is a shared concern expressed in the policy documents at national and EU level and all those documents set out explicit elements which can be seen as research priorities. These elements are expressed in terms of facilitating research in a major area or in a particular scientific discipline, in terms of human resources capacity, funding resources and financial mechanisms or research infrastructure and coordination. From this standpoint, considerable progress has been achieved since the 1990's. However, with the notable exception of England and to some extent Wales, drug research is not covered by a specific national strategy. Even if the process is underway at the EU level, there is no formal priority setting mechanisms across the countries. Besides, with few exceptions, the elements dealing with research in the policy documents are not presented explicitly under the heading of "research" which prevents from highlighting

clearly what should be a research priority. Also, except in the EU drug strategies, the generic priorities for research are rarely translated into formalised actions.

Defining a well-focused strategic guidance for drug research, built on clear and precise policy priorities which can be easily translated into operational actions remains a key issue to be tackled.

Research funding

Major steps forward have been achieved in very recent years for the development of drug research. At the EC level, substantial budget resources have been earmarked to financing research in the drug field. Thanks to this effort, the number of drug related studies launched in three year (2010-2013) is more important than what has been funded in a decade (2001-2010). Besides, for the first time within the framework of the cooperation programme of the Fp7, the theme of "Addictions" was chosen for a Large-scale integrating project in 2010 with a focus on the social sciences and humanities. Thanks to its size and the number of high level scholars and research institutes involved, the project funded under this grant (AliceRap) promotes cross national partnerships, should increase awareness and knowledge in the field and provide useful guidance documents for policy makers.

At national level, new mechanisms of funding have been created in some countries to step up drug research such as scholarships for young researchers in France for instance.

However, several conclusions of previous studies are still relevant today such as the need for a sustainability of funding. Research teams and institutes devoted to drug research are still facing the uncertainties of their funding. Also, the complex application process of EC grants prevents research teams in several countries from accessing to EC funding programmes. This plays an important role in the unbalanced involvement of the countries in EC funded projects.

On the other hand, further efforts are needed in order to ensure adequate investments. Thanks to the successive mappings on drug research available to date, the authorities have information on current drug research activities and funding mechanisms but a specific investigation should be promoted in order to establish to what extent current drug research delivers a clear added value in terms of knowledge. Very recent analyses were performed about increasing the value of research and reducing avoidable waste regarding clinical and biomedical research in particular. Based upon an extensive literature reviews, the findings prove to be of great interest in order to bridge the gaps between research results and policy needs on the one hand, research results and their translations into policy implementations on the other hand. Such an extensive literature review could be fruitfully replicated in the field of drug research.

Research activities

1) Areas

Trends in illicit drug research drawn from the 369 projects analysed in the present study show the central place of the epidemiology of drug use, the consequences of use and the responses to the phenomenon. Compared with previous mapping, these areas are still being extensively studied. Besides, it appears that the spectrum of areas addressed by

researchers was expanded even if substantial differences exist among the countries considered.

The research needs regarding the epidemiology of drug use are now adequately addressed in the countries considered. A lot of studies are being carried out in this area since the 1990's. From this stand-point, according to the three stage 'sequencing' in the development of drug-related research established by Kenis, research examined in the present report reached far beyond the first stage of development.

The attention given to the consequences of drug use is another strength of current research which suggests a shift compared to previous mapping. The area proves to be one of the major research foci whereas it was little investigated since the 1990s.

More attention is also paid to the determinants and mechanisms of drug use. However it should be noticed that the focus is on risk factors, biological factors and individual susceptibilities. The dynamics of the trajectories in drug use and the individual choices receive little or no attention. In other words, the influence of the drug user's motivations, the knowledge of drugs they develop in order to control their practice and the impact of the set and settings in the use of drugs are not taken into consideration. Nevertheless, the role of these factors as crucial mechanisms behind drug use have been demonstrated by the social sciences since the 1950's onward.

A closer look at the responses to the phenomenon shows that research in this area is very unbalanced. In line with the previous mappings of research, treatment responses are still covered most. Prevention research comes second. Many projects address this area but knowledge needs remain important and there is still a discrepancy between research carried out and the policy priorities appearing in national policy documents. Regarding primary prevention in particular, research needs remain significant even if the topic is at the core of several current EC funded projects.

The efforts in considering and addressing the other policy responses are problematic.Harm reduction responses are little addressed and law enforcement is hardly considered. Besides, although the implementation of good practices and the evaluation of drug policy are stressed as being of prime importance at national and EC level, evaluation studies on policy responses are practically non-existent, particularly outcome and effectiveness studies.

Research needs on drug supply is another major challenge. Little or nothing substantial is devoted to drug supply issues. The area remains a poor cousin of drug research at national and EC level.

The major gaps highlighted regarding the areas under-investigated have been emphasized since the end of the 1990's. Also, it is deemed important to better understand the obstacles which may hinder progress in these fields. Regarding drug supply in particular, there might be a lack of researchers specifically trained to focus on these issues or a lack of encouragement on the part of the authorities to attract researchers in the field. Also, there is a discrepancy between the will to launch evidence based policy and the efforts to promote evaluation studies of policy responses well-designed, properly conducted and followed through.

2) Disciplines

In line with the trends in research mentioned above, epidemiological and neuroscientific analysis of drug issues are more or less well developed across the countries surveyed and the EC funded projects identified. But crucial social sciences are lacking. Among them, Economy, Criminology, Geopolitics, Legal sciences and Political sciences are practically non-existent. This prevents from providing crucial findings regarding supply and market issues as well as policy evaluation for instance. Anthropology and History are also neglected. Nevertheless, the mobilisation of those disciplines would be of great help in order to explain the evolution in the patterns of use as well as the way all the stakeholders (from policy makers, to health professionals and law enforcement agencies) have gradually built several responses to the phenomenon.

Besides, it is worth noting that an important number of projects are multidisciplinary which is consistent with the needs emphasized in policy documents. However, there is few interactions and exchanges between social sciences and medical sciences. It is still necessary to strengthen the inter-disciplinarity in order to expand knowledge in the field and meet the expectations of the authorities.

Moreover, while the importance of qualitative research was mentioned since the 1990's there is a striking gap between the qualitative data available and the quantitative data, surveys, indicators and other quantitative methods being much more developed.

3) Other features

It should be noted that the vast majority of projects deals with several substances or focus on 'addiction' without specifying one substance in particular. This emphasizes that most of the researchers have adopted a conceptualisation of drug use which encompasses all the substances or that they pay attention to the major trend in the patterns of use namely the poly-drug use. However, it should be noticed that very few projects deal with new psychoactive substances, although the very fast and wide development of these substance is a growing concern at European level.

In addition, progress has been made regarding the need for cross national studies since the 1990's particularly through the involvement of the countries in EC funded projects. It is worth noticing that the countries involved in ERANID are leader or partners in some or many current EC funded projects. However, research activity is still mainly done at national level and there is plenty of room to improve cross-national partnership. The implementation of comparative studies in particular remains a gap to address.

The access to the inputs of the studies is another major issue. The projects examined in the present study being underway, it is too soon to appraise to what extent researchers will ensure a wide accessibility to their results through European or international publications, conferences but also other means of communication tailored to the needs of national and EC authorities. The latter point especially, should be closely monitored. In order to underpin an evidence-informed drugs policy, both researchers and policy makers still need to improve their coordination. The scientific community should continue its efforts to translate knowledge in a format accessible for policy makers who, in turn, should work towards a clarification of their priorities for a coherent long term drug research strategy.

SUMMARY OF POTENTIAL OPTIONS TO IMPROVE DRUG RESEARCH WITHIN THE ERANID PROJECT

Drug-related research policy and funding

- Developing formal priority setting mechanisms and strategic guidance for drug research at national and EC level consistent with drug research outcomes and changing drug trends.

- Promoting the sustainability of drug research resources through the development of long-term funding programmes at national and EC level

Research capacities

- Increasing the pool of social sciences experts on drug issues at national and European level (ad hoc training and research grants).

- Promoting a pool of high quality researchers:

  o Ensuring long-term funding for the teams and institutes devoted to drug research;

  o Attracting advanced social scientists and encouraging training of young researchers in the field (regular doctoral scholarships, inclusion of the theme of addiction in higher education).

- Promoting the development of networks of drug researchers across the disciplines.

- Implementing monitoring processes to facilitate the accessibility and visibility of research findings

Research activities

- Promoting the visibility and the dissemination of social sciences literature in the drug field

- Promoting the development of qualitative data and empowering the attention given to the specific findings of qualitative studies.

- Promoting extensive literature reviews of the added value of current drug research projects and potential waste that could be avoided.

- Providing strong support to the development of research in the fields of drug supply and drug policies (particularly the evaluation of prevention and law enforcement interventions)

- Expanding research activities and knowledge in the following fields:

  Social determinants of drug use, further work on reviewing and assessing drug harms (including NPS but not exclusively), prevalence and patterns of NPS' use.

- Performing cross-national and comparative studies as well as outcome and cost-effectiveness studies

- Developing inter-disciplinary studies combining social sciences and medical sciences

DRUG RELATED RESEARCH AT NATIONAL AND EC LEVEL: SUMMARIES OF MAIN FEATURES

Belgium

In Belgium, the epidemiology of drug use, the effects of misuse as well as prevention and treatment responses are still well established. Highlights include the weight of Social sciences in the current projects, and in particular disciplines hardly mobilised in other countries. Another salient point of the national situation regarding illicit drug research includes the almost exclusive position of academic centres. Overall, partnership appears to be well developed inside the country but the involvement of the teams within cross-national collaboration remains relatively modest. It has to be noted that the budgets allocated to the projects are relevant for certain designs of studies but they are not sufficient for large scale projects. This can be a barrier to access a wider scope of partners.

Drug-related research priorities being little formalized in policy documents, it is difficult to appraise the consistency between current research projects and policy needs. However, it should be noticed that the need for knowledge in the area of supply and markets mentioned in the Belgium Common Declaration of January 2010 is addressed by some current projects. Also, Belgian projects meet the need for multidisciplinary approaches expected by the authorities. By contrast, progress should be made in the field of prevention and treatment responses as well as regarding cross-border and translational approaches. Surprisingly, whereas a priority on social sciences and humanities was not formally made explicit in the policy documents, these disciplines are particularly mobilized in the projects identified. Prevalence, incidence and patterns of use are also an important focus of projects whereas the area is not mentioned as a research priority. Progress is needed regarding cross-border and translational approaches which are raised by the authorities.

France

Compared to previous mapping, it appears that drug-related research in France has been strengthened. The governmental body for drug issues (Interministerial Mission for Combating Drugs and Addictive Behaviours - MILDECA) placed increased emphasis on drug research and more teams have entered the field. Several topics such as the patterns of use, treatment responses, the determinants and consequences of drugs uses are well covered. Other issues receive less attention or are neglected. This is particularly the case of drug supply issues and law enforcement responses. Epidemiological analyses are clearly the most often carried out in the projects. Medical sciences are mobilised to a

lesser extent and except sociology, nearly none social sciences analyses is provided. In other words, the spectrum of analyses of the phenomenon is little diversified. In addition, it should be noticed that a lot of teams are used to work together on a same project even if the partnership is little trans-national.

Although drug research priorities are not formally made explicit by the authorities, the policy documents raise strong concerns which are addressed by a number of current research projects. This is particularly the case regarding the epidemiology of drug use, treatment responses and the consequences of drug use. Also, specific approaches supported by the authorities such as neurosciences are mobilized by a number of projects. More knowledge is expected regarding prevention responses, supply reduction and the authorities express their interest for the genetics of addiction which is neglected by researchers. By contrast, current research projects give special attention to areas that are not particularly emphasized in the policy documents such as the determinants and mechanism of drug use, as well as harm reduction responses.

Italy

Italian research projects focus primarily on one topic, the consequences of drug use. The other drug issues are clearly examined to a lesser extent, or neglected. A medical approach of drug related issues dominates Italian research projects. This approach is mainly based upon neurosciences. This feature is coupled with little epidemiological research. Also, very little attention is being paid to drug supply issues like in the others Eranid participating countries. Similarly, social sciences have only a modest presence. The national coordination body (*Dipartimento Politiche Antidroga* - DPA) plays a significant role in funding research projects. These particularities are consistent with the strategic development and vision behind the development of research capacity and funding that have been identified previously. Indeed, the establishment of the National Research Centre provided a strong support to important basic science research but less attention and capacities were dedicated to other areas of drug research.

Italian policy priorities regarding drug research are not made explicit in the relevant documents. However, it can be said that the strong emphasis put on neuro-scientific analyses of drug issues in current projects reflects a concern of the authorities. In addition, cross border initiatives improved. Areas such as the epidemiology of drug use as well as prevention and treatment responses which are emphasised in policy documents still need further investigations. Besides, current projects tend to combine several disciplines as expected by the authorities but there is room to promote interactions and exchanges between medical sciences and social sciences. It should be noted that major foci of drug researchers are not mentioned explicitly as priorities in policy documents. This is the case of the determinants, the mechanisms and the consequences of drug use.

The Netherlands

Current research in the Netherlands appears to address more or less a large spectrum of areas. Except drug supply issues and law enforcement –which are neglected in all the Eranid participating countries and at EC level- the Dutch projects deal with all areas related to drug issues. However, it has to be noticed that medical approaches dominate social sciences analysis, most of them being totally neglected. The teams mainly come from academic centres and the country is well represented at European level.

Current Dutch projects meet major needs set by the Netherlands authorities. A large number of areas targeted in the policy documents are addressed by the researchers and the presence of Dutch research teams in transnational projects meet the need for cross-border initiatives. Still, prevention and harm reduction responses remain insufficiently covered. Also, it should be noted that two important features of current projects are not targeted within policy documents: medical approaches are dominant and a lot of projects deal with the determinants of drug use.

Portugal

Current research in Portugal keeps on giving high priority to the epidemiology of drug use. Even, compared to the other Eranid countries and in proportion to their respective global effort for drug research, Portugal comes first regarding prevalence issues. But it should be noted that closer attention is being paid to the consequences, mechanisms and determinants of drug use. Like the other countries considered in this report, Portugal shows little interest in supply reduction and law enforcement. More surprising, treatment issues are little considered whereas this is seldom the case elsewhere. Compared to the other countries, Portuguese research includes a significant proportion of mixed projects which provide a combination of social sciences and medical sciences. Still, medical views on drug issues are dominant and most social sciences are very much neglected. Partnership is not developed particularly extensively in the country as well as cross national projects. But it should be noted that Portugal is involved in twelve transnational projects, six of them being funded by the EC.

Some major features of current Portuguese projects are in line with the concerns raised by the authorities. This is the case of the strong emphasis put on the epidemiology of drugs as well as knowledge expected regarding the mechanisms and consequences of drug use. The way research projects develop interaction between social sciences and medical science meet another expectation of the authorities. However, concerns expressed regarding law enforcement, harm reduction and drug related crime need further investigations. Researchers are also invited by the authorities to mobilise a far wider spectrum of disciplines such as neurosciences, pharmacology, toxicology, biology, ethnology, criminology and economics.

UK

The UK has a long-standing tradition of drug-related research and compared to the other Eranid participating countries, academic centres involved in drug-related issues are numerous in the country. Besides, the UK is the only country to have adopted a strategy fully dedicated to drug-related research. Although the geographical scope of this strategy covers only England and Wales to some extent, it constitutes an unprecedented initiative to promote drug-related research. The projects identified between 2010 and 2013 focus primarily on treatment and epidemiological issues. These results are in line with the features of the British projects identified in the 2000s. However, compared to this period, more attention is being paid to the determinants and consequences of drug use. Also, compared to the other Eranid participating countries, harm reduction responses is an area significantly addressed in current projects. By contrast, all the other research areas receive very little attention. In line with these features, the main disciplines mobilized are epidemiology, neurosciences and sociology. The very low use of other disciplines emphasizes important discrepancies between the topics addressed,

current British projects being particularly focused on treatment and epidemiological issues. Besides, in proportion to their global investment on drug research, British projects tend to favor medical approaches of drug issues more than in the other Eranid participating countries. Partnership do not appear to be particularly developed, the majority of the projects identified being led by a single research organisation. Also, three over four projects identified are not cross-national. Nevertheless, the country is very present at European level. The UK is involved in forty eight transnational projects, twenty of them being funded by the EC.

EC funded projects

Illicit drug research was given a significant, growing attention at European level over the last years. The number of projects funded in three years (2010-2013) is comparatively far more important than what was registered in ten years (2001-2010). Besides, the spectrum of drug research areas investigated has broadened with major efforts on the mechanisms of drug use, prevention responses and prevalence issues. The importance of projects dealing with prevention responses is a characteristic feature of EC funded projects compared to the Eranid participating countries. In addition, it should be noted that EC funded research projects meet some of the major needs emphasized in policy documents such as a better understanding of the causes, nature and consequences of the phenomenon as well as prevention and treatment responses. On the other hand, major drug supply related topics are hardly addressed and most social sciences are neglected.