



Co-operation Group to Combat Drug Abuse and illicit trafficking in Drugs

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Impact of COVID 19 on migrants, refugees and IDPs who use drugs

The members of the Pompidou Group's Support Network of Professionals (SNP) working in the drug field with migrants, refugees and IDPs have analysed the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the lives of these social groups. They have observed that these vulnerable groups have suffered disproportionately in comparison with the general population under the present circumstances. The SNP highlights the need for adequate responses protecting the physical and mental health of these most vulnerable groups.

Asylum seekers, migrants, refugees and IDPs are among the highest risk populations for developing addiction problems: post migration trauma, experience of violence and conflict, unstable and inappropriate long-term living conditions, unemployment and social exclusion. These factors have been aggravated by the pandemic as such, as well as by related measures and restrictions. The SNP identifies 5 areas of concern: (1) social stigmatisation and exclusion, (2) housing and accommodation, (3) access to treatment and care, (4) access to asylum and migration services, and (5) employment.

Foremost, COVID-19 pandemic has **increased a negative sentiment towards immigrants and refugees** in many countries and has had reinforced the belief that these groups contribute to the spread of the virus far more than other populations. As a result, it has been observed that during the pandemic xenophobia, incidents of hate speech, social stigmatisation towards these communities have visibly increased. Refugees and migrants who use drugs or suffer from addiction disorder are even more marginalised and **stigmatised** under these circumstances.

The SNP members emphasise that the **living conditions in overcrowded facilities** contributed mainly to the widespread COVID 19 outbreak among these populations leading to even further stigmatisation and social exclusion. These conditions made it practically impossible to respect sanitary measures such as physical distancing. This resulted in longer periods of social isolation and interruption of access to education and care services. Such conditions are the breeding ground for starting or increasing alcohol and drug consumption. This situation is aggravated by the fact that many migrants and refugees were **homeless** at the beginning of the pandemic and many of them are already using drugs or are considered at high risk of starting consumption. The SNP observed that need to provide accommodation has increased dramatically while the existing capacities were already insufficient to accommodate the pre-existing demand. Temporary measures providing accommodation in hostels and hotels or opening municipal shelters have proven to be often inadequate in view of the needs of these vulnerable groups. At the same time health treatment was limited to urgencies and dispensing methadone.

COVID 19 is a disease that affects physical health and it has been observed that it also has **severe consequences for the mental health** of the general population. While the consequences are greater for vulnerable and marginalised groups this did not result in more access to support and care. Access to addiction services, mental health treatment and psychosocial support remained limited and insufficient for a considerable part of 2020. Most of the addiction services were suspended, especially during the first

wave from March to May 2020, and those that remained open were limited to urgencies and opioid substitution treatment(OST), operating with reduced personnel or with distance consultation. Distance consultations were not an adequate response for this target group because of the absence of the cultural mediator or the interpreter, the lack of the necessary equipment or because of the living conditions where access to reception facilities was either limited or suspended. Street work interventions were also affected because of confinements and the mobility restrictions.

Access to mental health treatment and care was also reduced in comparison with the pre-pandemic situation and it was covering mainly urgent situations. Similarly, most related service delivery was conducted via distance and remained mostly inaccessible for people living camps and other facilities.

Access to asylum and migration services was also affected. COVID-19 measures had a **great impact at the functioning of the asylum and reception systems** across Europe. Travel restrictions and social distancing measures have affected disproportionately migrants/asylum seekers who arrived during the pandemic. Admission and administration of new asylum applications and reception is often greatly delayed resulting in conditions that threatened physical and mental health. This has also led in some cases to human rights violations. While similar human rights violations were already recorded prior to the pandemic, the operations of most national asylum and migration administrative services were suspended partially or fully for more than 2 months and interviews were carried remotely with great difficulties. This caused further process delays in addition to the already long processing times before the pandemic. In addition, since May 2020 until today the number of appointments remain limited and vast delays have been reported in most European countries. Such conditions where people experience long term instability and insecurity with regard with to their fate are increasing distress and constitute serious stress factors. However, responses aimed at mitigating this situation are emerging. In several countries resident permits are extended until the end of the 2020.

Finally, COVID-19 measures have **severe impact on employment** and affect disproportionately foreign nationals without protection status or without stable living conditions. It has been generally admitted that migrants, and in particular irregular migrants and refugees, often do not have equal access to labour markets nor they enjoy full social and labour rights. They also have higher chances to be engaged in precarious working conditions and consequently have limited access to social welfare in case of unemployment. In addition, they are mainly employed in industries that have been severely affected by the pandemic: tourism, food and service industry. This has led to a loss of job and income for many as they were not entitled to unemployment benefits and welfare allowances. The members of the SNP underline that lack of employment and lack of income are considered as high-risk factors strongly related to drug abuse and addiction problems.