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2025 MedSPAD Committee Meeting

Meeting Report

Monday 26 May 2025: 13:00 – 17:00

Tuesday 27 May 2025: 9:00 – 17:00

Address: Paris, Council of Europe Office
55 avenue Kléber, 75016 Paris

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Monday 26 May 2025

The meeting brought together 12 experts from Algeria, Cyprus, Egypt, France, Jordan, Lebanon, Malta, Morocco, Palestine*, Portugal, Spain and Tunisia (see *List of participants in Appendix 1*). Project consultants from the Italian National Research Council (CNR), and a representative the European Parliament also participated in the meeting. Participation of the MedSPAD committee members was financed by South-Programme IV funded by the European Union and the Council of Europe, whilst one representative from Jordan was financed by the EU4MDII project run by EUDA. Practical arrangements for the meeting were arranged and financed by the Pompidou Group.

Introduction and welcome

The opening and welcoming remarks were presented by:

- **Orsolya Libic**, Programme Manager, Pompidou Group of the Council of Europe
- **Elisa Benedetti**, MedSPAD Project Consultant, Researcher, Italian National Research Council
- **Sabrina Molinaro**, MedSPAD Project Consultant, Researcher, Italian National Research Council

MedSPAD consultants highlighted the significant impact MedSPAD has demonstrated over the years and congratulated the committee and the Secretariat on their collective achievement.

Presentation of the Fifth MedSPAD Regional Report

Elisa Benedetti and Sabrina Molinaro, authors of the 5th Regional Report, provided a comprehensive overview which analyses substance use and related risk behaviours among adolescents, focusing on Egypt, Lebanon, Morocco and Tunisia.

The report examines the prevalence and associated factors of various behaviours, including the use of tobacco, water pipes, alcohol, cannabis, other illicit drugs, non-medical use of pharmaceuticals, gambling, video gaming, and social media. It provides a comparison across countries and with findings from the previous report, expanding the geographical coverage and deepening the methodological framework to identify common risk factors.

For the first time, e-cigarettes, water pipes, and anabolic steroids, as well as the indicators of parental and friends' use were included in the scope of analysis. Results highlight significant gender differences, early initiation patterns, high perceived availability of substances among adolescents, and low risk perception across the region as key contributors to substance use and addictive behaviours. Peer and family influences, as well as students' social habits and school engagement, emerge as major environmental and individual risk/protective factors in the Southern Mediterranean region.

Boys smoke three times more in all MedSPAD countries than girls, requiring targeted preventive interventions. Social behaviours like video gaming and social media use are widespread in the region, with high rates of self-perceived problematic use (55 %), especially in Tunisia and Lebanon.

At the same time, countries show distinct trends in some aspects. For instance, Lebanon consistently reports the highest rates of use across many substances, while Egypt and Tunisia

often show lower prevalence, nonetheless facing concerning trends in early use and misperceptions of risk.

For the first time and unlike its European counterpart ESPAD, this report examines the real-world policy impact of MedSPAD data. According to the reporting entities, in Egypt, findings have influenced mental health services and legislative initiatives; in Lebanon, they have informed national strategies despite socio-economic crises; in Morocco, they have shaped school-based and digital interventions; and in Tunisia, they have supported national prevention strategies and training programmes.

The Report concludes with underscoring the importance of using MedSPAD data to guide evidence-based prevention, bridging existing gaps between research and policy, and supporting targeted interventions. MedSPAD should continue to expand regionally, encouraging broader participation and fostering stronger international collaboration to address adolescent risk behaviours through informed, data-driven action.

The Report is currently undergoing the editing phase and will be published in the Autumn.

Implementation of first surveys in Jordan and Morocco in 2025 in cooperation with the Pompidou Group and EUDA

Jordan presented plans to launch their first MedSPAD survey in September 2025, targeting 16–17-year-olds in 45 schools with a sample of 1,500 students. Concerns about clarity of terminology used for substances such as New Psychoactive Substances and parental consent were discussed. Conduct of the survey including national training have been funded by the EU4MDII project run by EUDA.

Morocco also presented their plans to implement the 5th national MedSPAD survey in October and November 2025, carefully timed to avoid interference with school holidays. The survey will target adolescents aged 15 to 17 years old and aims to generate robust data on several key areas. Specifically, it will assess the prevalence of psychoactive substance use, social media use, video gaming, and gambling among young people. In addition, the study will collect information on the age of initiation into these behaviours, offering valuable insight into early risk exposure. A central focus will be the identification of potential predictive factors for substance use and other addictive behaviours. These include lifestyle choices, socioeconomic background, family environment, access to information about drugs, and school performance. Together, these elements are expected to serve as important indicators that can support the development of evidence-based mental health policies within school settings. The survey also seeks to capture the opinions and behavioural patterns of this age group, enriching the understanding of youth perspectives across these domains.

Roundtable: implementation of MedSPAD in other Southern Mediterranean countries

Egypt:

The country reported the establishment of dedicated treatment centres for youth. Two academic papers were published on prevalence and risk factors, along with a third examining the link between mental health and behaviour.

Lebanon:

The political transition and conflict situation have delayed plans in Lebanon to disseminate national MedSPAD findings. Following discussions with various stakeholders, the need was identified for more prevention tools. The MedSPAD member informed that WHO will conduct another youth health survey. Since several national and international surveys target young people though with different focus and depth related to substance use, it will be essential to clarify the added value of and distinction with MedSPAD surveys. A request was made for a concise factsheet or press release comparing Lebanon's data with other countries to support policy discussions.

Palestine*:

Plans are underway to pilot MedSPAD in the Autumn, a national committee tasked with implementation was established. Due to escalations of conflicts in the region, the foreseen MedSPAD training planned in Amman on 15-16 July 2025, is postponed to the Autumn.

Presentation of ESPAD 2024 report and cross-regional analysis of trends

The presence of MedSPAD consultants *Elisa Benedetti and Sabrina Molinaro*, who are respectively the Project Manager and Project Coordinator of the European School Survey Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs (ESPAD), has allowed for the presentation of freshly published results of the 2024 ESPAD, covering 37 European countries. The project, ongoing since 1995 and implemented by an independent scientific committee, collects harmonised, cross-national data every four years from nationally representative samples of 15-16-year-old students. It aims to support evidence-based policies by deepening knowledge of substance use and new addictive behaviours. ESPAD has been the inspiration for the creation of MedSPAD, nevertheless, MedSPAD allow for a more flexible and in-depth measurement of risk and protective factors and policy impact, as well as cross-regional comparison.

Key findings reveal that smoking and vaping remain prevalent, with 28% of students using either cigarettes or e-cigarettes. E-cigarette use, particularly among girls, has risen sharply, and early initiation is common. Although cigarette smoking has declined in many regions, alternative nicotine use challenges traditional prevention metrics. Alcohol remains the most consumed substance, with 73% of students reporting lifetime use and 31% engaging in binge drinking. Girls increasingly match or exceed boys in alcohol intoxication prevalence and risky drinking behaviours, prompting concern.

Cannabis is still the most used illicit drug, though lifetime and current use have declined to their lowest levels since 1995. Boys use cannabis more, but the gender gap has narrowed. Use of other illicit drugs remains relatively stable, while non-medical use of pharmaceuticals, particularly tranquillisers and painkillers, is rising—especially among girls. Inhalant use, notably nitrous oxide, also shows gendered increases. Gambling and gaming behaviours are stable but increasingly digital, online gambling and problematic video gaming show notable gender convergence. Social media use is widespread, with 47% of students showing signs of problematic engagement.

The 2024 survey introduced new modules on mental well-being (using the WHO-5 Index) and prevention activities. Mental health status of adolescents shows regional and gender disparities, with girls consistently reporting lower levels. While most students reported participation in prevention programmes, many interventions were limited to awareness events rather than skill-building efforts. Girls tend to engage more in substance-focused sessions, while more boys attend programmes on gaming and gambling.

Similarly to the MedSPAD regional findings, the ESPAD 2024 findings underscore shifting behavioural trends and a narrowing gender gap in many risky behaviours,

Tuesday 27 May 2025

Update of the MedSPAD Survey

On the second day of the MedSPAD Committee Meeting, participants focused on reviewing the current MedSPAD questionnaire.

Participants were divided into working groups to reflect on the existing survey and make suggestions on: (1) whether any challenges in national implementation have occurred regarding the current formulation (comprehension) or coding of questions (data analysis) that would prompt change; and (2) whether any optional question should be turned into core; and (3) whether any additional topic or issue should be added, such as new substances or behaviours.

The aim of the exercise was to ensure greater relevance, clarity, and alignment with evolving realities in youth behaviour and public health priorities in future surveys, informed by the ESPAD and MedSPAD regional results. Following suggestions were made by the groups when discussing each question of the survey:

- School performance: add an objective classification of academic performance according to each country.
- Time spent away from home: provide options on reasons for spending time away.
- Economic situation of family: use standardised scale.
- Relationship with parents: Add question on availability of parents in order to have better insight on related risk factors, add question about parents' role perceived by the student.
- Frequency of gaming and gambling: information needed about hours spent with gaming, not only whether a student played in the last 7 days, and optional questions about types of game and use of virtual reality-based gambling.
- Mental health: add WHO 5-scale assessment.
- Smoking: add clarification regarding IQOS, i.e. which category they fall into; question on non-combustible tobacco products is not applicable in the Middle East.
- Alcohol use: questions relating to alcohol should be carefully selected due to cultural specificities and restricted to regions/areas where alcohol use is more socially acknowledged to avoid generating discomfort.
- Tranquilizers and sedatives: categories should be extended to controlled substances used for non-medical purposes.
- Other substances: add Pregabalin, and New Psychoactive Substances by providing examples such as synthetic cannabinoid and different street names of the substances.
- Before a student answers a question about a particular substance, it could be asked whether the student knows the particular substance or not (yes/no question), and if not, the question(s) related to the substance should be skipped.
- It was pointed out that the questionnaire may be too long to be filled in one session, and whether it could be divided by the main sections to be filled on separate occasions.

The Pompidou Group Secretariat, together with the Project Consultants, was asked to coordinate the update of the MedSPAD survey for the use of South-Med countries, planned to be applicable as of next year. Financial support for the update of the questionnaire and implementation of new surveys will be subject to the availability of funding.

End of the MedSPAD committee meeting

The meeting closed with remarks from Orsolya Libic, who thanked participants for their contributions and emphasised the importance of continued cooperation in future MedSPAD activities. She also pointed out that an important priority for the future, if funding allows, will be to support country-specific activities that aim to translate MedSPAD data into concrete policy actions and targeted national prevention interventions.