Drug policy evaluation in Europe

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Definitions

Drug policy  Following Kilpatrick (2000)
A system of laws, regulatory measures, courses of action and funding priorities concerning (illicit) psychoactive drugs and promulgated by a governmental entity or its representatives

Evaluation  European Commission
« Evaluation is a judgment of interventions according to their results, impacts and the needs they aim to satisfy. It is a systematic tool which provides a rigorous evidence base to inform decision making »

Area under review:

27 Member States of the European Union, + Croatia, Turkey and Norway
Drug strategies and action plans of the European Union

Drug strategies and action plans in Europe

National drug strategies and action plans in the EU-27, Croatia, Turkey and Norway

www.emcdda.europa.eu
National drug strategies and action plans

• Comprehensive
• 50 - 200 actions, sometimes very detailed
• Duration: 3-8 years
• Implementation supervised by a national drug coordination body

But….

• Sometimes long lists of (unclear) wishes
• Not always linked with budgets
• Sensitive to government change in some countries
Final evaluations: what for?

- Reviewing achievements
- Preparing a new strategy and action plan
  - Adapting the policy to the current drug situation and existing responses
  - Improving the policy implementation and reallocating resources
- Identifying data gaps

The situation

- An increasing number of evaluations
- Quite a few “lost in complexity”
- Some very bad science and some self congratulation exercises
- A few evaluations that stand out because they have a sound and pragmatic approach
- No single best practice
Why?

• Complexity of policies
• Needs and requests of stakeholders
• Data availability (e.g. law enforcement)
• Understanding impacts

Stakeholders have different questions.....

• Policy makers
  • does the intervention improve the overall social/health situation of the population?
• Sponsors/Funding agency
  • is the money well invested?
• Project/services managers and teams
  • are we doing the right things?
• Evaluators
  • does it allow the development of new methods and instruments, the publication of articles, etc.?
• Public opinion
  • does the government do something to protect me and my children?
Stakeholders have different interests.....

- Policy makers
  - is it politically profitable?
- Sponsors/Funding agency
  - does it please policy makers?
- Managers and staff of projects/services
  - will we receive additional funds?
- Evaluators
  - will it pay the mortgage and allow me to do other more interesting research?
- Public opinion
  - does it fit our values?

Data availability

- Differences between health and law enforcement
- Monitoring cannot be decided ex-post
- Accessibility of data
- Delays
So, why evaluate?

- An opportunity to look backwards…and forward
  - Adapting the policy to the current drug situation and existing responses
  - Improving the policy implementation and reallocating resources
- Identifying data gaps

EMCDDA guidelines for the evaluation of national drug strategies

- Guidelines based on:
  - A multi criteria analysis of a sample of 25 evaluation handbooks and manuals
  - A questionnaire survey on evaluation and progress reviews of drug strategies in European countries
  - A review of evaluation reports of drug strategies published by European countries
Plan it well!

- Involve stakeholders and clearly delimit the rules of the game
- Define scope of evaluation (limit it whenever possible)
- Define a limited set of clear evaluation questions
- Take into account the available resources for evaluation (time, money, data)
- Whenever possible, choose joint or external evaluations

Don’t miss the obvious: assess the evidence base and the appropriateness of the strategy

- What scientific evidence did the strategy rely on?
- Was the strategy appropriately planned considering the drug situation and the service needs?
- Have there been major changes during the time of the strategy that would have required an update?
Understand the implementation: not an audit!

• Use existing annual progress reviews
• Focus on key elements of the strategy
• What was achieved?
• What was not achieved?
• Why? What should be done differently?

Discuss the impact issue

• Focus on specific elements of drug policy
• Compare trends in the drugs situation with other (neighbouring) countries
• Consider delays due to data sensitivity or availability
European Drug Information Network: REITOX

27 EU Member States, Croatia, Turkey and Norway

+ 6 countries from the Western Balkans

...preparing for an extension to Eastern and Southern Neighbouring Countries of the EU

Crucial role of National Drug Observatories

“EVIDENCE-COLLECTORS/PRODUCERS”

- Data collection
- Analysis and interpretation
- National networks of experts/institutions
- Quality control
- Reliability - Credibility
- More Science - Less Ideologies and beliefs
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