



Research Report

World Health Organisation

Enhancing the prevention and treatment of substance abuse, including
narcotic drugs and harmful use of alcohol

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INTRODUCTION

In 2021, over 2.3 billion people were alcohol consumers and 1 in every 17 people worldwide had used another form of drug, which was 23% more than a decade earlier. Alcohol and narcotic drugs are psychoactive substances, which means that the risk of addiction and dependence is relatively high. Another feature of alcohol and narcotic drugs is that most of them come with severe health consequences that not seldom lead to death.

Each year, over 3 million people die due to the harmful use of alcohol. This is equal to 5.3% of all deaths worldwide. When looked at narcotic drugs, the data states that in 2021, in the USA alone already more than 160.000 people died from a drug-involved overdose.

However, the harmful use of alcohol and narcotic drugs causes not only damage to an individual, but it also brings significant social and economic losses to both the individual and the society.

This research report aims to investigate the demand-side of alcohol and narcotic drugs. This includes the effects that people who suffer from substance abuse have on the rest of the society and the treatments that are available. It will also investigate the supply-side including the illicit trade in drugs. Lastly, this research report will take a look at the earlier made conventions, plans and treaties concerning this topic.

Definitions of Key Terms

Substance abuse

Excessive use of a drug in a way that is detrimental to self, society, or both.

Narcotic

A drug or other substance that affects mood or behaviour and is consumed for non-medical purposes, especially one sold illegally.

Note: in a specific context, the term narcotic only refers to a specific group of drugs that reduces pain, tension and anxiety. When this definition is meant, it can be deduced from the concerning context.

Non- communicable diseases

Diseases that are not spread through infection or through other people, but are typically caused by unhealthy behaviours.

Drug trafficking

A global illicit trade involving the cultivation, manufacture, distribution and sale of substances which are subject to drug prohibition laws.

Drug trafficking organizations (DTO's)

Complex organizations with highly defined command-and-control structures that produce, transport, and/or distribute large quantities of one or more illicit drug.

Drug cartel

An illicit corporation of independent organizations formed to limit competition and control the production and distribution of illegal drugs.

People Who Inject Drugs (PWID)

PWID is a commonly used abbreviation of People Who Inject Drugs. PWID have a relative high risk of catching HIV due to the easy transmission of this disease when needles are shared.

General overview

History

It is unclear when the first human beings started using drugs. Nicholas R. Longrich, a Senior Lecturer in Evolutionary Biology and Paleontology at the University of Bath, stated in one of his articles that: *“Archaeologists have found evidence of opium use in Europe by 5,700 BC. Cannabis seeds appear in archaeological digs at 8,100 BC in Asia, and the ancient Greek historian Herodotus reported Scythians getting high on weed in 450 BC. Tea was brewed in China by 100 BC.”*

However, it is possible that our ancestors experimented with substances before the archaeological evidence suggests. Stones and pottery preserve well, but plants and chemicals decay quickly.

Alcoholic drinks are around since the agricultural revolution took place. The cultivation created a surplus of starches and sugars, which, mashed and left to ferment, transformed into the first alcoholic drinks.

In ancient times, all the alcohol and drugs were made from organic substances. They were used for either medical, religious, or recreational purposes.

Viewing that alcohol and drugs have been around for centuries, so has substance abuse. Nevertheless, before the scientific knowledge about the workings of the brain and the chemicals in narcotics and alcohol that alter this, addiction was seen as a moral failing and no help was provided. It is since the late 20th century that brain imaging scans show the effects of drugs on the brain and that addiction has started to be seen as a disease. By labelling drug and alcohol abuse as a disease, it became also possible to be cured. This is one of the reasons for the growth in rehabilitation centres in the last century.

Current situation

Narcotic drugs and alcohol are still very common in today's world, even though

almost all nations have implied measures to limit and prevent the usage of these substances. These national laws are implied because of public health or religious reasons.

In most nations, alcohol is either prohibited until a certain age limit is reached, or completely forbidden.

Narcotic drugs are in most cases only allowed with a prescription from a medical specialist.

However, the illicit trade in narcotic drugs is still a very vibrant sector. It is estimated that the cultivation, manufacture, distribution and sale of the products that are subject to drug prohibition laws cover an industry that is worth more than \$32 billion dollars.

Moreover, the illicit drug economy accelerates other illegal markets that also harm the environment and human rights like (illegal) deforestation and illegal gold mining, mainly in the Amazon Basin. This exacerbation occurs due to the fact that there are a lot of different criminal groups active in the Amazon Basin. These different criminal networks help in the trafficking of the illegal drugs. The money they earn for this work, can afterwards be invested in other illicit projects.

Also, a way to launder the profit from illicit drug trafficking is to invest it in land speculation and the agricultural sector. This is called 'narco-deforestation', since these investments often require logging of the Amazon rainforest.

Negative effects on the individual and society

Substance abuse negatively influences the user as well as the rest of the world.

When looked at alcohol consumption on an individual level, the World Health Organization states that: "*There is a causal relationship between harmful use of alcohol and a range of mental and behavioural disorders, other noncommunicable conditions and injuries.*" This means that alcohol consumption can lead to health issues such as but not limited to brain damage, cardiovascular diseases, several forms of cancer, damage to the nerve system and depressions.

Alcoholism from an individual also affects the rest of the society. The productivity of this person decreases, the health costs rise, and irresponsible drinking can also lead to traffic crashes and violence.

The use of narcotic drugs for non-medical reasons can also have severe consequences for one's health. However, there is a wide variety in different kinds of drugs that affect one's mind and body differently. Narcotics reduce tension and anxiety, while stimulants increase alertness, attention, and energy.

Nevertheless, both can cause, among other diseases and health issues, a psychosis. During a psychosis, you lose touch with reality and see, hear or feel things that are not there in reality.

People who suffer from drug use disorders also lose a lot of their productivity and due to the health issues caused by excessive drug use, health costs will rise. Apart from

that, drug use is intertwined with criminality, which has effect on the safety of all citizens.

Major parties involved

World Health Organisation

A specialized agency within the United Nations that is focussed on achieving the highest level of health for everyone. It is involved in many diverse projects that all connect to Sustainable Development Goal 3: ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages. Target 3.5 of this SDG is to: strengthen the prevention and treatment of substance abuse, including narcotic drug abuse and harmful use of alcohol. Therefore, the WHO plays a big role in achieving this goal.

UNODC

This is the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. According to the UNODC itself its mission is to: *“contribute to global peace and security, human rights and development by making the world safer from drugs, crime, corruption and terrorism.”* Its members have composed several commissions that help with the prevention and treatment of substance abuse.

United States of America

Although the USA has seen much worse numbers in the past, the country is still home to around 8 million addicts. In the seventies of last century, the USA implemented its ‘War on Drugs.’ This was a campaign led by president Nixon who declared drug abuse to be: “enemy number one.” However, after Reagan became president, the laws concerning the war on drugs became much harsher and were mainly focussed on the incarceration of people and not on the rehabilitation anymore. There has been a lot of critique on this strategy, since most of the people that got imprisoned were African-Americans. Today, the war on drugs is done at a much less intense level than it was during its peak in the 1980s.

Apart from the war on drugs, the USA also struggles with alcoholism. It is ranked on the seventh place worldwide on the list of nations with the highest rate of alcohol-use-disorder. The USA is also the second largest producer of alcoholic beverages in the world.

Mexico

Mexico has been ravaged for decades by several drug cartels. These cartels operate on an international level and it is estimated that they are active in over 50 countries. However, most of the DTOs transport drugs to the USA, which is why the USA has cooperated with Mexico in reducing the illicit drug trade. Over the years, the USA has appropriated billions of dollars to Mexico and helped to, among other things, improve the military aircraft, surveillance software, justice system and crime-prevention programs. Nevertheless, there are still tens of thousands of homicides in Mexico each year that can be linked to a cartel. This number peaked in 2020, compared to the years before, and has not yet reduced.

Russia

In the past, the harmful consumption of alcohol used to cause numerous of premature deaths in Russia. In 2004, 75% of the Russian men were heavy drinkers. Twelve years later, in 2016, this number had decreased to 48%. Although heavy drinking has been a long tradition in Russia, the alcohol consumption has dropped enormously in the last two decades. This drop can be explained due to stricter rules that were implied by the Russian government. For instance, the government has raised taxes, banned unlicensed stores from selling alcohol, and prohibited every form of advertisement of alcoholic beverages.

Although Russia has seen a huge decline in alcohol-use-disorders, there has been an increase of drug use, especially of PWID. This has led to a higher number of civilians who died because of an overdose on illicit drugs, as well as a rising of the number of HIV-patients. The Russian Federation enforces strict rules and regulations regarding drug-users, which violate several human rights. In 2017, The Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights recommended that Russia changed its punitive policy approach. However, no changes have occurred in Russia's drug policy since that time.

Timeline of Key Events

1839-1860: Opium wars between Great Britain and China

1948: establishment of the WHO

1971: Nixon declared a 'War on Drugs' in the USA in which drug abuse was 'public enemy number one.'

1997: establishment of the UNODC

2012: establishment of the SDGs including target 3.5: Strengthen the prevention and treatment of substance abuse, including narcotic drug abuse and harmful use of alcohol

2020: start of the COVID pandemic, which led to an increase in drug-usage and drug-related-deaths worldwide.

Previous attempts to solve the issue

There have been copious attempts to lessen the number of people who suffer from substance abuse and to provide good treatment for those in need.

There are three international drug control conventions. The purpose of these conventions is to generate an international control regime. States that are party to these conventions should ensure that the mandatory control measures are applied to substances listed in the schedules of these conventions.

When a substance is scheduled, it is put under international control. This way, it can still be available for medical or scientific purposes, but can drug abuse be prevented.

Alcohol has been a recurring topic in the WHO since 1951. In 2010, a milestone was achieved when the WHO adapted a resolution that proposes a global strategy to reduce the harmful use of alcohol. This global strategy is elaborated in a number of guiding principles that recommend a portfolio of policy options that could be considered for implementation at a national level.

Possible solutions

It is important to realise that this topic can be divided into two parts; prevention and treatment.

A lot of countries already have a set of rules and regulations that should prevent substance abuse. These regulations can however quite differ. Most nations have for example an age limit for alcoholic beverages, a ban on advertisements and higher taxes on these products. Drugs are often banned or can only be obtained for medical or scientific reasons.

Nevertheless, there are also nations that choose a different approach regarding prevention. Portugal, for example, enforces a drug decriminalization policy in which drug use and drug possession is not seen as a criminal act that requires imprisonment. The intention behind this method is to accept the reality of drug use, instead of hoping that it will somehow disappear. This way, drug use will be seen as a health issue instead of a criminal issue.

When thinking about resolutions that include the prevention of substance abuse, it is valuable to take both methods (limitation versus decriminalization) into consideration. Also, bear in mind the illicit drug and alcohol trafficking. Tackling this, will reduce the demand and therefore assist in the prevention of drug and alcohol misuse.

The second part of this topic is about the treatment of substance abuse. Possible solutions could be more focussed on the working of the different healthcare systems all over the world and to what extend civilians can be treated when necessary.

Further Readings

To get an overview of the WHO global strategy regarding the reduce of harmful alcohol usage:

https://iris.who.int/bitstream/handle/10665/44395/9789241599931_eng.pdf?sequence=1

To get a better understanding of illicit drug trafficking:

<https://www.unodc.org/>

To learn everything about SDG target 3.5:

<https://www.who.int/data/gho/data/themes/topics/indicator-groups/indicator-group-details/GHO/sdg-target-3.5-substance-abuse>

Summary of the report on worldwide drug use in 2022 from UNODC:
https://www.unodc.org/res/wdr2022/MS/WDR22_Booklet_1.pdf

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