



## “Drugs and Youth in the context of international development”

### Drugs and Youth

The abuse of drugs – legal as well as illegal – is no longer only a problem of the industrialised world. Children and young people are especially vulnerable to the experimentation, use and abuse of drugs. In some countries, they are involved in the cultivation of drugplants or in the illegal drugs trade and its violent conflicts between drug cartels, both as victims and as perpetrators.

#### Drug use patterns among young people

According to the World Youth Report 2003, many regions of the world experience levels of youth substance use and abuse that represent historic highs. Next to alcohol and cigarettes, cannabis is the illicit substance most commonly used worldwide. Although much smaller numbers of young people use other illicit drugs, opium and heroin use prevails and is increasing in Eastern Europe and Asia, whilst Coca-based drugs are common in Latin America. Crack cocaine is a considerable problem in the Caribbean, whilst metamphetamines are currently the leading substance of concern in Thailand and the Philippines. Inhalants (volatile substances) are generally abused by young (street) children.

The age at which young people begin to consume drugs is decreasing. At the same time, consumption patterns are becoming more risky as young people increasingly mix substances or use drugs excessively. Intravenous drug use among young people is also on the rise. There is a clear gender divide in drug abuse patterns, in almost all countries adolescent males are more likely to use substances in risky ways. In recent years, however, drug abuse by girls has been on the rise, and non-medical use of medications is more common among girls.

#### Vulnerable groups:

- abused children and youth
- children from broken homes
- school drop outs
- child labourers and child soldiers
- street youth and young gang members
- child sex workers
- other marginalised groups (refugees, indigenous youth)
- traumatised youth
- youth in drug transit countries
- youth in drug cultivation areas
- youth in conflict areas

#### Drug abuse as a development problem

Most drug users today live in low and middle-income countries. Poverty, social disintegration, lack of perspectives access to education, health and leisure services and youth employment opportunities put young people at high risk of developing drug abuse problems. Apart from physical degradation and short and long term mental health risks like depression, paranoia and even psychosis, addictive behaviours can hamper young peoples’ personal and professional potentials and employability.

In countries like Brazil, children and young people are increasingly involved in the illegal drugs trade since it offers an income and traffickers regard children as cheap labour. In many countries, drugs are an integral part of gang violence and crime and are used for group bonding or to increase confidence prior to engaging in criminal activities. Youth prostitution to finance addiction is also common. In all these cases, young people are prone to both inflicting and becoming victims of violence. As figures from Eastern Europe show, the risk of HIV and Hepatitis C infection among young injecting drug users is higher than average, as needle sharing and more risky sexual behaviour under the influence of drugs are widespread. Youth drug abuse and the causes and consequences named above are therefore of high concern for the societies in low and middle- income countries.

#### Challenges for development Cooperation

Today, organisations, governments and the population at large are taking notice of the potentials of young people for improving the prospects of the societies they live in. With 70% of the population in many low and middle-income countries being younger than 25 years old, there is a great human resource and potential that should be supported and empowered, especially since young people are often the experts of their specific circumstances and should

## Drugs and human rights

In Article 33 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, all states agree to protect children from the illicit use of narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances and to prevent children working in the illicit production and trafficking of such substances. From a human rights perspective, it is very important to address the needs of those with substance use problems as they are often unable to exercise their rights to health and (health) education. It has been suggested that young people without access to a range of appropriate prevention and treatment services suffer from 'programmatically vulnerability', which may be viewed as a human rights issue.

therefore be strengthened, involved and used as competent partners. Young people often are or can become involved in their communities and address –among other issues– the risky behaviour of their peers and community members. As such, they are not only the target group of youth promotion but also key change agents.

Especially since the turn of the millennium, international conferences and agreements, such as the World Youth Forum in Dakar in 2001 or the UN Millennium Development Goals have provided a global framework for the promotion of young people. The German government has integrated youth promotion in its Action Programme 2015, which specifically stresses the importance of promoting the participation of children and youth to advance their potential and overcome social exclusion and a lack of perspective.

GTZ has a wide variety of tools and methods that promote young people and their health. These include the creation of youth-friendly spaces for promoting sports and creative activities (youth centres), the provision of adolescent-friendly health services, life skills training (the development of decision-making and goal-setting, stress management, assertiveness and communication skills), awareness-raising among parents, teachers and important com-

### Protective Factors:

**Individual:** Coping/life skills, social competence moral/religious beliefs and values

**Peers:** Affiliation with friends who are socially stable and have strong anti-drug attitudes

**Family:** Parental involvement and clear rules, social support for the family, strong and positive family bonds, security and stability

**Community:** Community anti-drug norms, healthy leisure activities, access to services/employment

**School:** Positive school climate, anti-drug and violence norms, successful school performance and good bond with school and their community

munity players, the improvement of education and income opportunities.

Measures that have proven successful in preventing or delaying the onset of drug use among young people in industrialised countries all being adapted to the social and cultural circumstance in partner countries. Evidence-based approaches include those that take place in settings (e.g. school, workplace, youth centre), that are target group-oriented (focusing on levels of risk environment and behaviour, age and gender), and that have a long-term focus. Mass media or information campaigns can play an important role in complementing more specific measures, but should not be carried out as a sole measure.



a young man smoking opium

## Development-oriented Drug Control

The Programme for Development-oriented Drug Control (DDC) has developed approaches that specifically deal with the prevention of drug abuse through communicating information about drugs and strengthening young people's skills and capacities. Through the peer-to-peer approach, adolescents educate each other about risky behaviour and possible solutions, for example through group discussions, role-plays, songs or theatre. Community-based approaches that have included youth participation have also proven successful in various projects in Latin America.

In cases where young people have developed addictive behaviours, target-oriented harm reduction measures can be implemented to reduce morbidity (HIV/AIDS) and mortality. Harm reduction measures consist of outreach and street work, substitution, counselling and the provision of needle-exchange programmes.

More information: [www.gtz.de/drogen](http://www.gtz.de/drogen)



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