Formal opinion of the Scientific Committee on the EMCDDA multiannual single programming document for the period 2024-2026 (DRAFT)

1. General overview

The Scientific Committee welcomes the single programming document (SPD) of the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA) for the period 2024-2026.

The document is in line with the current EMCDDA Strategy 2025 and reflects the existing organisational structure and tasks given to the agency by its current mandate. This is both necessary and correct, but an obvious challenge is that organisational change and preparatory activities are also necessary during this period to implement the new Regulation on the European Union Drugs Agency (EUDA), which will replace the EMCDDA during the course of 2024. The Scientific Committee, therefore, congratulates the EMCDDA for introducing activities into the SPD that will help establish the new competencies envisaged for the agency's future work. We also note, however, that the EUDA will necessarily address a wider set of scientific areas and require organisational change in order for new business areas and competencies to be established. We, therefore, acknowledge that while the current programming document is appropriate for the initial transition period, some of the areas will require review and adjustment in subsequent years to reflect the developing priorities and needs of the new organisation.

The SPD document for the 2024-2026 period necessarily presents an ambitious programme of work. Going forward, the Scientific Committee invites the EMCDDA to incorporate in the future structure of its work programmes a well-defined strategy of implementation, particularly in terms of change and continuity management. The new mandate provides the agency with greater resources and competencies to be more proactive in identifying and responding to health and security threats, and for identifying and addressing important knowledge gaps through studies and other follow-up measures. These competencies are much needed, at the same time however, the Scientific Committee is mindful of the importance of not forgetting the value provided by the EMCDDA's historical work programme. We note, therefore, that care should be taken to ensure that new activities are complementary and build on the successful scientific work that the EMCDDA has accomplished since its foundation. It is particularly important in this context not to undermine in any way the utility of well-established methodological approaches and time series of data that have proven value for tracking trends over time in the drug situation in Europe.

The Scientific Committee appreciates the developmental approach envisaged by the agency, which will be necessary to put in place the new technical competencies as set out in the new mandate. Increasing capacity in the toxicological and forensic area is, for example, particularly needed, but it should be acknowledged that it will require time and investment to develop this area successfully. In this context, we also note with approval that the SPD envisages from the start to complement developmental activities with substantive projects that will provide value at both European and national level in areas that could not be addressed under the agency's former mandate. We believe this

approach is a good one, as it will allow the agency to do the necessary technical work to create the methods and networks necessary for its future success, while at the same time concretely demonstrating the utility of the activities of the new EUDA to its stakeholders. Organisational efforts outlined in the SPD to create a more digital, inclusive and sustainable agency are also appreciated, as is the emphasis placed on creating new digital platforms to facilitate collaboration and enhance communication and stakeholder engagement. While welcoming developments in this area, the Scientific Committee reminds the agency of the need to maintain high scientific standards and take a neutral and independent approach to the evaluation and reporting of evidence in all areas relevant to its mandate. In our view, maintaining the EMCDDA's longstanding reputation for scientific rigour and impartial analysis will be of critical importance to ensuring the future success of the work of the EUDA.

The Committee notes that the tasks outlined in the proposal for a new regulation can be grouped under the general headings of monitoring, preparedness, and competence development. These tasks, which cut across the agency's main areas of policy interest (health and security), provide opportunities to address current and future challenges through an integrated work programme that recognises the shared policy objectives of actions in the drugs area. The Scientific Committee, therefore, encourages reducing further the segmentation of work addressing scientific issues in the health and security space, within the general context of providing a more holistic understanding of costs and harms, and how these can be best mitigated or reduced by increasing overall preparedness and data-driven and evidence-based responses. We also note that while these policy areas remain conceptually distinct in the new Regulation, they will necessarily overlap with respect to the activities required for data collection, analysis and reporting. We, therefore, recommend that, at the scientific level, while recognising the need in some areas for specialisation and expertise, the organisation encourages synergy and integrated working practices across all its areas of technical competency.

While the robust monitoring of developments remains a key task for the agency, the Committee particularly welcomes the further development of European drug alert and threat assessment competencies. These are complementary and, in some ways, overlapping tasks. Developmental activities in this area should build upon the lessons learnt from the agency's already established work in drug monitoring, rapid methods for data collection and early warning in the area of new psychoactive substances. A transdisciplinary, multi-method and integrated approach will be required, in our view, to ensure internal and external synergies and effective working practices. These new competencies will allow the agency to become more proactive in following up on developments that may have important implications for promoting European public health and security. It is also important that the agency's work continues to directly inform both policy and practice, and in this context the Committee also welcomes the new emphasis given to competency development within this SPD, reflecting the greater prominence given to this task within the mandate of the EUDA.

Specific comments

The Scientific Committee acknowledges and appreciates the scientifically robust work programme outlined in the SPD 2024-2026 and recognises the strategic efforts made to uphold scientific independence during the transition to the new mandate and to actively involving the scientific community in the agency's work. The Committee expresses a

keen interest in obtaining further insights into the planning process aimed at achieving these important goals. The strengthening of links with both European and international research centres through networking activities is especially welcomed, as this will allow the agency in the future to have greater insight into important global developments that may have significant implications for responding to drug problems in Europe.

Furthermore, the Scientific Committee notes the importance of including in the SPD cross-cutting topics that are necessary for the implementation of the EUDA's mandate. These topics include: 1) training, education, dissemination and capacity building, with a focus on the valuable contribution that universities and academic institutions play in this area; 2) research, innovation and foresight: where the agency is given a new role in conducting studies, supporting drug-related research initiatives and identifying priorities; and 3) the evaluation of outcomes: where it is envisaged to increase the investment in developing sound methods and implementing studies to better understand the impact of policies and practice in areas relevant to the agency's mandate.

In the main area of *Health,* the Scientific Committee welcomes the opportunities that the SPD 2024-2026 provides for the future in the domains of drug prevention, harm reduction, recovery and social integration and health monitoring. The Committee considers the European Prevention Curriculum an opportunity to expand and address the specific intervention needs of subgroups with distinct requirements, as well as to outline how the agency will effectively reach these groups. The Committee emphasises the importance of incorporating additional primary and secondary indicators pertaining to intervention and prevention programmes. Several members of the Scientific Committee encourage the EMCDDA to continue capturing the experience of people who use drugs and their communities. This approach aims to foster a comprehensive understanding of topics such as intergenerational drug use and polydrug use, trauma, co-morbidities, or specific populations such as refugees. By gaining insights into the community's perspective, stronger relationships can be forged, and a holistic approach to addressing challenges in this field can be achieved. The Committee also notes the need to give greater priority to the topic of recovery and suggests greater consideration should be given to exploring opportunities to gather data and address practice-related issues in this area.

The Committee supports and encourages the agency's plans to strengthen the EU Early Warning System on new psychoactive substances and to enhance further its monitoring, alert and risk assessment functions using the all-hazard approach.

In the main area of *Security*, the Scientific Committee appreciates the balance found and underscores the significance of recognising the importance of a newly established laboratory network to deliver good quality and timely forensic and toxicological information and its usefulness as an integral and complementary component within the drug area.

Members of the Scientific Committee express appreciation for the EMCDDA's endeavours in conceptualising the area of drug-related crime, with a particular focus on violent crimes and drug-related homicide and their prevention. Furthermore, the Committee wishes to support the developmental work planned for enhancing the quality of all market indicators and encourages the agency to achieve rapid and substantial progress in these areas.

Moreover, the Committee notes the importance of developing new expertise and capacity in the monitoring and threat assessment of scheduled and emerging precursor chemicals used in the production of controlled drugs and new psychoactive substances. This work is seen as particularly relevant to the European Commission's policy and actions in this area.

In general, the Scientific Committee acknowledges and endorses the agency's adoption of the foresight approach, advocating for its continuation. The Committee suggests considering influential factors such as global warming, the growth of the global south, and other noteworthy mega-trends when shaping future activities. A strong emphasis is placed on promoting research related to darknet and social media and other online marketplaces. In addition, the Committee expresses its interest in acquiring a deeper understanding of the EMCDDA's new approach to financing and conducting research and the opportunities to further focus on the previously identified research priorities, especially on drug-related violence and the environmental impact of drug production.

The members of the Scientific Committee appreciate that the EMCDDA is receptive to suggestions and supports the idea of integrating different research topics within framework contracts.

Lastly, recognising the importance of promoting the work of the EMCDDA, members of the Scientific Committee appreciate the investment proposed in the SPD for supporting the dissemination of EMCDDA products. The Committee notes the need to do more, however, in monitoring the utilisation of EMCDDA data in scientific publications and policy documents.

2. Conclusions

The Scientific Committee endorses the SPD for 2024-2026 as a valuable framework that takes into due account both the current mandate of the EMCDDA and the transitionary efforts needed for the launch of the EUDA in mid-2024. We do recognise, however, that with the launch of the EUDA in 2024, it will be necessary to review both the content and form of the planning framework as it is presented in future SPD, as the needs of the new agency mature and new structures and networks are put in place.

The programme's focus on health and security reflects the agency's core areas of work, and the efforts to maintain scientific principles during the transition to the new mandate are appreciated. These efforts are seen as an opportunity to further enhance the synergies between the key elements of the programme, promoting collaboration and integrated actions to identify and address current and future drug-related challenges of importance to the European Union.

Finally, the Scientific Committee reminds the agency that ensuring scientific rigour and independence in all aspects of its work will remain as important to the future work of the EUDA as it has been in the past to ensuring the success of the EMCDDA.