
PROGRAMME ON SUBSTANCE ABUSE

**Prevention of substance abuse
among young people in
Central and Eastern Europe**

Project update and report of
WHO missions undertaken in 1997



DIVISION OF MENTAL HEALTH AND
PREVENTION OF SUBSTANCE ABUSE
WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION

ABSTRACT

In 1997, a special project *Prevention of Substance Abuse Among Young People in Central and Eastern Europe* was coordinated by WHO's Programme on Substance Abuse (PSA). The project represents a major initiative to develop a comprehensive and coordinated response to primary prevention of substance abuse in young people in seven countries in Central and Eastern Europe - Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and Slovakia. Each country represents a project in its own right but the common aims and objectives of the country initiatives are linked into the broader project. The project has a strong emphasis on national capacity building and supports the empowerment of local resources. It also seeks to build networks for exchanging information between the seven countries.

The project promotes the establishment of National Task Forces and preparation of National Strategies addressing primary prevention of substance abuse among young people in each of the seven countries to guide national priorities and selection of priority projects, as well opportunities for intercountry communication and exchange of information.

In 1997 the Programme undertook missions to all seven countries with a very positive response to participation in this Project and establishment of National Task Forces. This report provides a summary of the current situation of the Project and detailed mission reports, which describe key issues related to the establishment of National Task Forces, the participation of young people on the Task Forces, as well as an overview of youth-specific prevention work related to substance use, the substance use situation among young people and technical assistance needs identified in the seven countries.

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Introduction

The Prevention of Substance Abuse among Young People in Central and Eastern Europe project is being coordinated by the World Health Organization's Programme on Substance Abuse (PSA). The project represents a major attempt to develop a comprehensive and coordinated response to primary prevention of substance abuse in young people in seven countries in Central and Eastern Europe - Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and Slovakia. Each country represents a project in its own right but the common aims and objectives of the country initiatives are linked into the broader project. The project has a strong emphasis on national capacity building and supports the empowerment of local resources. It also seeks to build networks for exchanging information between the seven countries.

The project promotes the establishment of National Task Forces and preparation of National Strategies addressing primary prevention of substance abuse among young people in each of the seven countries to guide national priorities and selection of priority projects, as well creating opportunities for intercountry communication and exchange of information.

The project has received financial support from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). The UNDP financial support for this project was made available to the World Health Organization through the dialogue between UNDP and the Mentor Foundation. Additional funding support from the Department for International Development, United Kingdom (DFID-UK) was provided in 1997 to strengthen WHO's technical assistance to the project. During 1997 the WHO Regional Office for Europe also became a partner.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR THE PROJECT

Against a background of increasing awareness and evidence of the significant public health impacts of substance use, many countries are starting to rethink and strengthen their responses to these problems.

Experience from around the world has shown that substance use and related problems cannot be significantly prevented or reduced by any single and limited measure. WHO therefore believes that responding effectively to the problems of substance use related health and social harms requires a comprehensive and coordinated approach across a range of organizations and agencies. WHO has also stressed the need to take early preventive action before harmful and health-damaging behaviours associated with substance use are developed by young people. For this reason, this project focuses on strengthening primary prevention approaches to substance use, with young people as a key target.

Such a task can never be the mandate of one group only. WHO recognizes the need for intersectoral partnerships to respond effectively to the range and complexity of problems associated with use of psychoactive substances among young people. In this context government agencies, non-government organizations, and community members all have a significant role to play. Our success in preventing health and social problems related to substance use will depend on our ability to work in close cooperation with one another. Therefore, the project emphasizes bringing together key groups to jointly assess the situation and develop workable solutions.

WHO also believes that young people themselves have a vital role to play in developing approaches to prevention, and responses to substance related issues. They are not merely targets for activities or interventions, but, where appropriate, they can become critical players in designing, implementing, and evaluating approaches. They have a unique understanding of their motivations to experiment with and use substances and can bring a critical new dimension to planning interventions. Accordingly, the project encourages exploration of innovative ways to engage the active participation of young people in all aspects of the programming process.

OVERALL PROJECT OBJECTIVES

The project aims to promote and strengthen primary prevention approaches to substance use prevention at country level through direct technical cooperation.

EXPECTED OUTPUTS

The project will develop and test innovative models for the prevention of substance use related health and social problems amongst young people in a range of different geographical, cultural, social and economic settings, through the mobilization of local resources for human resource development.

Given the extent of the current problems, it is expected that benefits will accrue over the long term. However the medium term benefits from the project include:

- an agreed National Strategy in seven countries on how to counter the problems of young people and substance use and the priorities for future action;
- public awareness about issues related to prevention and reduction of substance-related health and social problems among young people;
- an organizational network which can be used as a vehicle for further expansion and development of projects; and
- a priority project in each country that has at least partly been implemented during the time frame of this project.

Current situation of the Project

In 1997 PSA undertook missions to all seven countries with a very positive response to participation in this Project. National Task Forces on Prevention of Substance Abuse among Young People have been established in each of the seven countries (*see Annex 1 for additional details*). Government and nongovernment groups in all seven countries have stressed that the National Task Forces, with the technical support of WHO and association with a WHO regional initiative, can focus attention on substance use issues specific to young people and increase political and technical interest in making responses to these issues a priority.

The mechanism of the National Task Force is seen at country level to afford multiple benefits, including opportunities to:

- bring together agencies which are now working separately on alcohol, tobacco, and other drug control and demand reduction strategies to systematically focus in an integrated way on issues related to the range of substances used by adolescents and to coordinate appropriate responses;

- develop and gain support for standards of practice and guidelines specific to prevention approaches with young people; and,
- gain experience in effective methods to engage young people in strategic planning.

There is strong agreement amongst government and nongovernment groups that both types of organizations need to be part of the National Task Forces. Also, the opportunity for Task Forces to develop a "priority project" is welcomed as a chance to address selected areas, such as evaluation of current interventions and development of qualitative evaluation methods with particular populations of young people. Groups consistently stressed that despite many valuable programmes, there is fragmentation of efforts by both government and nongovernment organizations (NGOs). The need to bring together people from different disciplines was also voiced. The National Task Force is seen as an excellent mechanism to tackle these challenges.

There was interest in the regional aspect of the Project and the opportunity to learn more about activities in other countries. Opportunities to participate in training related to interventions, monitoring and evaluation and how to construct National Strategic Plans specific to young people and substance use were requested. A short workshop on strategic planning was seen as useful as early in the process as possible.

All countries visited identified the need to critically study available information about the effectiveness of various prevention approaches with young people, as well as the current coverage of interventions in different settings and with different populations of young people to identify gaps and to inform future actions. It will be important for the National Task Forces to undertake such assessment as part of the situational analysis phase in the development of National Strategies. It was noted that evaluation of the effectiveness of interventions with young people in schools and other settings has been limited, and that minimum standards and criteria for assessing programmes were needed. Documentation of a common strategy on effective approaches for work with young people and prevention of problems related to use of substances would enhance programming efforts.

There was genuine interest in exploring and developing ways to enhance the participation of young people in planning, implementing and evaluating activities to prevent substance related health and social problems. Although experience with such participation (particularly in planning) was reported to have been limited, a number of resources and valuable examples of youth participation were identified in each country which could be drawn upon to develop effective ways young people can be part of the work of National Task Forces. For example, various NGOs which work with young people have had experience with direct participation of young people in planning and implementing activities.

Key areas of technical assistance identified as necessary to foster development of the National Strategic Plan and related activities include:

- training opportunities related to qualitative research methods, as well as information on other monitoring and evaluative methods found useful with different populations of young people in different settings;
- information on effective interventions and best practices related to prevention of substance use problems for young people in different ages groups and settings, particularly out of school;
- information on strategies to engage the participation of young people in policy and programme processes; and
- examples of national strategies to prevent substance use problems amongst young people and related training in strategic planning processes.

During 1998, it is expected that the development of a National Strategy to address youth substance use issues will be finalised in each of the seven countries. PSA will host a joint technical review meeting by September 1998, to review progress, and to promote further opportunities for technical assistance and exchange between WHO and the seven countries.

Introduction to reports of WHO missions

WHO missions to Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and Slovakia were undertaken between June and October 1997. The purpose of the missions to the seven countries selected for participation in the project was to:

- (a) initiate planning activities with a broad range of individuals and organizations (government and non-government sectors) in each of the respective countries towards the establishment of National Task Forces in each country to address substance use by young people;
- (b) identify needs for technical assistance related to the formation and implementation of the activities of the National Task Forces; and
- (c) collect in-country data to inform successful establishment of National Task Forces, development of National Strategies and effective priority projects.

The consultation process in each country reflected existing substance-related state organizational structures and communication links present amongst government and nongovernment groups. In some countries the consultation process primarily encompassed a series of individual meetings followed by closing discussions and de-briefing with the designated mission counterpart and WHO Liaison Officer. However, in several countries, lively "round table" discussions were held with government and nongovernment groups to explore and debate the potential role of the proposed National Task Force, as well as its leadership and membership. Such group discussions informed the consultation process and built national consensus for further action. Additionally, sites visits were made to selected substance-related prevention and treatment centres having direct contact with young people. In all countries, the WHO mission teams were successful in gaining high level access within Ministries and other state agencies to discuss the project. This high level of contact was very important to the success of the missions.

The following sections provide detailed reports of the missions to the seven countries selected for participation in this Project.

1. Report of a WHO mission to Bulgaria, 23-26 June 1997

1.1 INTRODUCTION

This WHO mission to Bulgaria launched the Prevention of Substance Abuse among Young People in Central and Eastern Europe Project at country level. This mission took place at the same time as the WHO Tobacco Policy and Programmes Mission to Bulgaria. Some meetings were scheduled jointly with the Tobacco Mission; however, separate meetings were arranged also to allow adequate time and focus on the distinct purposes of each mission.

The members of the WHO mission were:

Ms Leanne Riley, Scientist, WHO Programme on Substance Abuse, who served as team leader;
Ms Diane Widdus, Technical Officer, WHO Programme on Substance Abuse; and
Dr Peter Anderson, WHO European Regional Office.

Meetings were held with people within the Ministry of Health, National Health Education Centre, National Addiction Centre, National Public Health Centre, Ministry of Education and Science, Committee for Youth, Physical Education, and Sports, Bulgarian Red Cross, Open Society Foundation, UNICEF, UNDP, as well as with the WHO Liaison Officer, and the Deputy Mayor of Sophia to discuss the role of the proposed National Task Force in oversight and guidance of country-wide activities and strategies to address substance use among young people. See Annex 2 for complete list of persons met on mission.

This mission took place a month after a new government was formed in Bulgaria. People consistently noted the serious economic issues the country was facing, as well as changes within the government and potential restructuring of various ministries. People also expressed the opinion that the rapid changes in the country since the 1989 "Velvet Revolution" have influenced patterns of substance use among young people and contributed to new social phenomena, such as increasing numbers of young people who do not attend school. The development of non-government organizations (NGOs) interested in prevention and treatment of substance use issues was described as a positive outcome of the overall political changes and growth of civil society.

1.2 KEY ISSUES RELATED TO ESTABLISHMENT OF NATIONAL TASK FORCE

1.2.1 Response to proposed National Task Force

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