

Co-operation and Community Consensus - The Multi-Agency Approach to Effective Local Drug Policies

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Cities experience social phenomena and the expression of tensions connected with them immediately. But it is also there that a true social dialogue can materialise and take influence on a situation that affects all citizens of the community more or less directly on a day-to-day basis. Therefore, local approaches are important particularly on account of their proximity to the problem and the fact that responses may be implemented, experienced and understood immediately. Also, financial and personal resources can be applied more speedily and effectively at local levels, an argument that becomes more and more important as drug policy also has to be increasingly „cost-effective“ and the enormous local budgets for drug policy we have seen in the early nineties are being cut down or redistributed.

But, the scope to shape communal drug policies that are able to cope with local requirements and characteristics is often limited by legislation and guidelines decreed „at top down to bottom level“, without sufficiently taking into consideration peculiarities at the communal level. National governments and international policy making bodies are usually looking at long term problems and solutions, but can be very slow in responding to the changing needs of the cities who have to play a *passive* role in this process, although they have to play a central and *active* role in trying to tackle and overcome emerging problems.

Effective drug policy measures are dependent on a multitude of factors. However, many policy makers do not always recognise this. Neither do they appear to appreciate the significant contributions coming from various sources and disciplines - which often hampers the progress of effective response within the drug policy field.

Responding to problematic drug use in a community is a knowledge-based job that needs to take into account a large number of different aspects, skills, resources, and methods. Due to its diverse functions and responsibilities, a local government is one of the few entities that comprises a relatively wide range of specialists and concerned groups in a relatively small area. Unfortunately, response mechanisms are sometimes inadequately thought out and developed and therefore seldom put into action in a truly effective and sustainable interdisciplinary approach. This is in most cases due to a lack of prioritisation, communication and co-operation.

Through horizontal and vertical affiliations across all organisations and legitimately concerned groups in the community, local governments are - theoretically - most appropriate to develop and maintain multi-disciplinary co-operation on the one hand and prioritise clearly on a relatively limited set of problems on the other. In practice, lack of good partnerships and well-defined structures however, may well generate conflicts and create confrontations among the acting entities rather than cooperation and synergy.

No single organisation can meet all the demands in a community on its own and experience shows that unbalanced approaches can overburden single entities to an extent where they themselves demand the implementation of a multi-agency approach from the policy makers of the community. But, it is one thing to have specialists in every conceivable technical field. Putting their knowledge to use at the right time and place, and making it available to other

colleagues is something else. Only then can value for the concerned groups and the community as a whole be created.

Yet, inter-agency co-operation requires a conceptual framework that extends beyond the routine experience of any single organisation. These processes are interactive and dynamic. As problems - and responses - in one area increase, they are likely to activate others. When one area of concern is neglected, it also tends to block others. Thus, the key question is how to establish - and maintain - a dynamic and satisfactory co-operation between concerned groups in the complex area of forming a common and community based response to a realistically assessed problem.

Key Questions in a Multi-Agency Approach

To not only diagnose new developments as soon as possible, but also react to them adequately, local authorities are increasingly looking for co-operation. A better definition of the various roles to play in a mutually developed over-all strategy also makes it possible for the authorities to co-ordinate and use their resources more effectively. In general, we have experienced that multidisciplinary community based action can help to achieve the two major drug policy imperatives:

⇒ Keeping the level of problematic drug use as low as possible

⇒ Damming up the negative individual and social effects of drug trafficking and drug use

The two basic drug policy objectives mentioned above, indicate four major sets of questions or indicators when it comes to building a comprehensive strategy.

Why?

⇒ Why is a multidisciplinary approach needed

In most cities, the drugs problem is more or less apparent and different actors on various levels have already taken some kind of action in tackling the problem.

A multi-agency approach helps to bring all information and expertise to a table and make it widely available. It also helps to form a well-targeted response where the different expertise, the individual approaches to the problem, and the different roles played by the groups involved may be co-ordinated.

⇒ Why would the agencies involved in tackling drug related problems want to co-operate

Of course, the concerns of the various actors involved will differ - sometimes greatly- and every actor has his own agenda.

But, while single agencies may not have sufficient competencies and resources, forming multi-agency partnerships may enable them to build synergy and benefit also from the competencies and resources of their partners.

Last not least, inter-agency co-operation may also help to get rid of misunderstandings about how other agencies work. This will enhance the understanding of different approaches and result in a better knowledge about the different aspects of the drugs issue. It is also fruitful to develop a common response that takes overlapping fields into account, because problematic drug use is often a sub-division of social welfare policy and therefore often a symptom rather than the underlying cause.

As mentioned before, there are numerous agencies and bodies involved in a multidisciplinary approach- and probably not all of them will be „experts“ on drug issues. Different interests, different agendas, different levels of commitment and expertise, different levels of influence on the public opinion or decision makers, as well as different access to financial resources might all be factors that provide ground for conflicts.

But there will certainly be one common ground between all of them: nobody wants to waste energy and resources.

Who?

⇒ Who are the concerned groups/agencies in the community

The first question that arose at the workshops was: who is a concerned group? You may answer: who isn't? But for a sustainable inter-agency approach you should identify those groups who have a legitimate concern and try to involve them as much as possible. In some cases, this might be a temporary involvement of some concerned groups that would later not be involved directly and continuously, i.e. residents of a certain neighbourhood who should be included when decisions concerning them directly have to be taken. As mentioned above, the „usual suspects“ (statutory agencies that have already been involved historically) would certainly be involved, but this should not lead to an exclusion of other legitimately concerned groups that have had a less significant voice in the community's drug policy so far. It is important to create a platform and atmosphere where these groups can contribute according to their own expertise and are being credited despite the fact that they are not traditionally perceived as „experts“ in the field.

⇒ Who will represent the agencies involved (hierarchy)

The workshops have shown very clearly that multi-agency co-operation should also involve various levels (street level, administrative level, political level, as well as law enforcement and criminal justice levels), but that the internal hierarchy of such working groups is a rather delicate matter. The Frankfurt workshop showed that the hierarchy level of the representatives of the various agencies can have a major impact on the objectives, the influence on policy decisions, and the community involvement.

1. a „**practice**“ **network** with an internal exchange of different experiences, know-how and expertise where actors from the same hierarchy level and closely linked fields of work may exchange their experience and demands. One example is the building of co-operations between social workers from different areas, such as drug and youth helping services, where synergy may be achieved through an on-going information exchange.
2. an **operational network**, where concrete activities of the various agencies are co-ordinated. In this context, it is necessary to have representatives from the agencies who are entitled to

decide on the activities and agenda of their agencies. The common decisions must then also be transported to the staff of the agencies.

3. **a strategic level** where common recommendations from the various actors are being developed and put forward to the political levels, such as municipal councils or parliaments. Co-operations on the strategic level need some form of official recognition from the political level to be more than a group of lobbyists.

⇒ Who should initiate such a working group

Who initiates these working groups may not be very important on the expert exchange level and the operational level, but an initiation - and clear endorsement - by the local politicians would certainly be important on the strategic level. The involvement of local politicians also signals that they take their political responsibility seriously.

On the other hand, high-level initiation may sometimes also hinder the effectiveness of the network when no sustainable link is being formed between the network and that level and political responsibilities in tackling drug related problems are being shifted from the policy makers to the working group.

⇒ Who defines the objectives/priorities of a multi-agency approach

The definition of the objectives and priorities of a working group depends both on the hierarchy level and on the linkage to the political level.

Of course, also government agendas influence this process to a considerable extend. However, with a good consensus within a well-established and credited network, these do not necessarily have to be taken for granted and should be challenged if the network agrees that there is good reason for it. This, of course, also depends on the strategic level the networks operate upon.

Some objectives may also not be possible to put into practice because of legal boundaries. Therefore, including also the legislative and criminal justice system would help to discuss legal barriers and necessary changes.

⇒ Who would benefit from a multi-agency co-operation

So, who is likely to benefit from a multidisciplinary approach? It is certainly the actors and decision makers on the different practical and operative levels, as long as their input is valued and conveyed also to the policy makers and politicians.

Drug users themselves will probably also benefit from co-operations, because their needs and demands can be put on the agenda through the helping agencies - or directly through user organisations involved in a multi-disciplinary approach.

Policy makers benefit from the on-going first-hand information from various sources and fields involved.

But the community as a whole may also benefit, because neighbourhood representatives will be heard (in many cities they have elected councils and considerable political influence).

If transparency of the decision making process on the various levels is ensured and decisions and recommendations of the working groups are also conveyed back to the public, pragmatic and flexible reactions to the drugs problem in the city become possible and sustainable.

With regard to the community as a whole, a well-established and well known network may also contribute to a decrease in irrational fears towards drug users and related issues that often prompt defence reactions to new measures.

What?

⇒ What makes the network work

Experience shows that it is not complicated to bring the actors to a table - but to keep them there and keep them committed is hard work.

There are different crucial ingredients that help to make a network work: mutual respect, an open and honest flow of information, a willingness to listen also to suggestions that may not be top priority in your field of work; the willingness to co-operate and accept others as partners in an overall common approach.

⇒ What is the role of each agency involved

Great care should be placed on defining the roles of the co-operation partners. Being a partner in a multi-disciplinary approach should be satisfactory for all actors involved and this is unlikely to be achieved if the actors don't know or accept their roles within the network.

In fact, the first task of a working group is to define clearly the different responsibilities and roles of the different actors and to see where agencies are making it complicated for others (or perhaps even themselves) to fulfil their tasks.

Defining responsibilities and their limits as clearly as possible can help to achieve several goals: it can take the burden off agencies and give credit to their expertise and responsibilities. It also makes every-day work easier for the agencies involved, because they also know their limits and can concentrate on their unique agendas. On another level, this may also influence policy, because the limits and negative effects of an unbalanced approach become clear and changes in the over-all policy could be commonly advocated by all agencies involved.

⇒ What is the status of the working group in the community

As I said before, there will probably be networks on different levels, but they should all have a possibility to put their common demands, inputs, comments, and observations forward to the policy making level. Involving central policy makers in this process will both enhance their expertise on the drugs issue and ensure better support and credibility of the working group.

A network co-operation without a general policy framework makes little sense. So does having a political framework and no forms of co-operations to achieve the objectives. Multi-agency networks should therefore be designed to put policy into practice and add onto the political agenda where issues are being neglected by the policy makers.

⇒ What can be commonly achieved by the network

For a better understanding of different roles and agendas it is important to achieve a better understanding about how the different agencies involved work and where their expertise and priorities lie. But this will probably be a long term process and misunderstandings about the different agendas and roles will have to be discussed frequently and openly.

It may also be one of the achievements of multi-agency work to redefine certain priorities and roles among the actors involved. Hidden agendas that are not being brought forward will certainly hinder this process.

The „bottom up“ approach can have a major impact in shaping drug policy when it also has some „top down“ support and appreciation.

⇒ What are the possible dangers

We have already mentioned hidden agendas as a possible danger for a comprehensive strategy. Therefore, all agencies involved should have a possibility to express their concerns and needs openly - this also includes the issue of funding, which can have a major influence on the agency's agenda and capacities.

Competition between the agencies will certainly play a part in the common work - and it should not be a taboo to discuss this issue. You may find out that your own agenda might have to be adjusted and you're not ready for change. Also, your self understanding is being challenged by others, but this may well be a positive process.

Exclusion of legitimately concerned groups is another possible danger. At all workshops the problem of a certain arrogance of the professional community towards „non-experts“ was discussed and all participants agreed that although very often this problem is not realised, it surely hampers satisfactory partnerships and community consensus. What's more, some of these actors may turn out to be „secret experts“ with valuable first-hand information.

Consequently, forming partnerships with actors who would not have dominated the professional agenda so far may also help to avoid self-satisfaction and broaden the perspective of the „usual suspects“ involved in the field.

„Diplomatic can be problematic“ - this is a truly delicate issue. Although it is, of course necessary to give all agencies respective credit for their unique share in tackling the problem, it may also be problematic to be too diplomatic.

There should be enough time to learn to speak the same language and to keep learning from the other actors and their expertise freely. It may take years of continuous work, but it is certainly the best tool to avoid wasting time and energy.

So-called meeting fatigue is a possible danger. Co-ordinators of working groups should try to ensure that the process of discussing and decision making is facilitated as much as possible to avoid this effect. However, the co-ordinators should not be forced to become „animators“ for the group. The danger is also that the partnerships may break apart when these highly committed individuals leave the group.

How?

⇒ How can tasks be divided

Experience shows that a division of tasks - based upon the unique agenda of every agency involved - is an important objective for multi-agency networks.

Also, a general strategy should be commonly decided and tasks divided accordingly, although this may well be a long and challenging process, but it is also important to make policy work effectively.

Within a commonly developed response, helping services may also experience that their budget has to be reallocated to new projects. Sometimes, this may cause friction, if the services are not included in developing new projects. In this process, their expertise has to be taken seriously.

⇒ [How can policy decisions be influenced by this group](#)

Being credited as an agency within the network is a good and necessary first step, but during the process common problems may occur frequently.

All actors involved should have a possibility to bring their common demands, ideas, or criticism forward to the strategic level –either directly or indirectly.

Also, clear - and feasible - short and medium term objectives are important and the group should measure regularly whether these have been reached sufficiently, with respective commitment from the agencies and also to their benefit.

⇒ [How can the community become involved](#)

Involvement of the community may be a bit more difficult. Most of the time, mainly complaints about certain developments reach the policy makers. Sometimes these are highly emotional and biased.

Another way of involving the community is to make policy decisions public - i.e. through the media or through discussions with neighbourhood representatives. Experience shows that it is unwise not to involve a neighbourhood before establishing certain facilities there and explain the benefits and possible negative effects of such a facility. It may also be possible to come to an agreement between the helping services, the police and the neighbourhood about what to do if certain unwanted situations should occur.

Informing the public about the multi-agency work in the community can also be done with the help of the media and will have the positive side-effect of „institutionalising“ the network. It may also be a useful tool in „educating“ the public about the drugs issue. However, the media tends to focus on „bad news“ and extremes more than on policy achievements or a balanced discussion of the actual situation.

It can also become problematic if agencies involved in a network put their drug policy demands forward via the media rather than through the network itself. Criticism should be expressed openly but not behind the network partners' backs. This will most probably cause friction within the group, but it is certainly also an indicator showing that the network does not give enough space for individual criticism to the involved groups.

⇒ [How can the work of the group enhance the every-day work of the agencies involved](#)

As mentioned above, a well working network of agencies will also have direct beneficial effects for the every-day work of the agencies involved and their staff. If the staff feels well represented in that group and is well informed about the decisions and what they mean for the every-day work, also „off the records“ contacts and partnerships may be established between the agencies. It is positive for the staff to know the general framework of their tasks and of the tasks of the other agencies they have to co-operate with every day.

At the same time, all agencies have to know their limits and obligations as well as that of the others. It may also be fruitful to spend time and money on additional training of the staff to actually conduct the tasks expected from them. If a new drug policy is introduced, it is advisable to organise training and information meetings to inform everyone about this.

⇒ How can effectiveness be evaluated

Transparency and openness are important factors when it comes to evaluating the effectiveness of multi-agency working groups. All agencies involved should have the possibilities to criticise the work of the network and to report about their problems in implementing the common approach. Of course, this is sometimes not easy, because it might be difficult to admit failure. It helps to have a body that organises and co-ordinates the activities of the network that is also open for „negative“ inputs from the agencies involved and puts it on the agenda for the meetings. Depending on the way the network is embodied in the political decision making process, it may be fruitful if the politicians and decision makers ask for feedback on certain issues.

Shaping an effective drug policy is a continuous process that needs honesty, pragmatism, and flexibility. Therefore, a critical assessment of the effectiveness of the over-all drug policy should be a basic corrective for inter-agency co-operation on all levels and conducted regularly. After all *„a good policy does not have to fear scrutiny“* and *„a bad policy definitely needs corrections as soon as possible.“*

Evaluating the fruitfulness common work for the agencies involved

A wide range of social, financial, physical, and political factors affect the ways in which citizens, NGOs and governmental institutions are able to work alone or in partnership with others. Networking should not be a purpose in itself. Losing focus endangers partnerships and has to be kept in mind during the whole process of co-operating. This danger can be overcome by focusing on an area of concern that is not too wide - both regionally and thematically - and can actually be achieved. Achieving mutual respect and common responses is a long-term process - and hard work. Time and again, the fruitfulness of the working group for the agencies involved and the effectiveness of the common work with respect to shaping drug policy in the community should be evaluated honestly. We have listed some key questions and indicators for both that may be used in monitoring and evaluating the efficiency of the network for all agencies involved:

- ? do the agencies involved benefit from the common work
- ? does the work facilitate policy decisions
- ? do the agencies involved know about their tasks and are they able to fulfil them
- ? is the problem really addressed
- ? is the group flexible enough to cope effectively with new developments
- ? what is the reaction of the community (media)
- ? are the concerned groups involved
- ? is the budget spent wisely
- ? is there an atmosphere of equity and transparency

Indicators for effective local drug policies

„If this new way of working is to succeed it must be supported. This support must begin with explaining the full implications of using this method of policy development. They will have to honestly evaluate the success (or lack of it) of the present and past policies. They will then have to let go of some of their most fundamental beliefs and allow for a new process of policy creation to take place..“

? are underlying social issues being addressed

- employment
- mental health
- housing
- youth
- families
- education
- health care
- migration
- quality of life
- civil rights
- is the drugs issue included in other arenas
- are priorities/policies determined locally or nationally

? what is the health status of the target group

- HIV/Hepatitis prevalence
- drug related deaths
- forms of consumption (risky or less risky)
- level of consumption (controlled or uncontrolled)
- range of treatment options available
- longevity of users
- poly substance use

? what is the crime level related to drugs

- value of international / domestic illicit market
- drug crime level / drug related crime level (to purchase drugs / under the influence of drugs)
- corruption / white collar crime
- drug seizures in relation to level of police activities
- police resources
- spending on enforcement and arrests
- drug using prison population

? is the supply regulated and controlled

- control of access to drugs
- control of purity and quality of drugs

? are the rights and responsibilities of users addressed and is inclusion and equity ensured

- level of involvement of user forums in policy making
- level of support for user groups
- user's attitude towards service provision
- inclusion of visible minorities in services in relation to demographic racial profile
- demographic profile of prosecutions with regard to visible minorities and others
- school exclusions
- denial of treatment

- restrictions on child care
- availability of information on drugs to users
- self images of drug users

? is the policy qualitative and satisfactory

- public understanding of drugs and drug users
- sense of security in the population
- economical aspects (spending of budget on drug related issues)
- impact of scientific research on policy making
- room for policy experimentation
- evaluation of the effectiveness of the policy
- community consensus/support for policy measures

? is there a good balance between the indicators

To ensure the effectiveness of drug policy, none of the above mentioned indicators should stand alone. Focusing too much on one of the indicators may result in negative effects in another. Generally speaking, an effective and just drug policy takes **all** of the following indicators into account:

- regulation and control of the drug trade
- reduction of drug related harm (ill health, crime, social exclusion, etc.)
- provision of open and honest drug education and information
- protection of the civil rights of all citizens - whether drug users or not
- inclusion of all concerned groups in shaping drug policy
- effective spending of resources in the drugs field

Although these indicators have all been developed out of the practical experience of almost 100 workshop participants, it is sometimes difficult to say why some multi-agency networks work and some don't. And it is certainly not possible to come up with the ultimate recipe for making them work. What became clear however, was that drug policy is a very complex field in which formulating a comprehensive approach and achieving community consensus can be even more complex - and is definitely on-going hard work.

After so much theory I would like to end with citing one practical – and encouraging experience shared with us by Garry Wallace, a colleague from Plymouth:

„Plymouth is not an exceptional place, it is not populated by people blessed by the partnership fairy, it really is just like your town and if we can do something good so can you!“