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SUBSTANCE ABUSE IN KOSOVO AND ITS EFFECTS ON MINORITY COMMUNITIES

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This Information Bulletin aims to draw attention to the growing problem of drug use in Kosovo and lack of research on the issue. Moreover, it addresses the double stigmatisation encountered by minority communities and the limited treatment options available.

ECMI Kosovo has conducted previous research on substance abuse and treatment options, particularly regarding the situation in northern Kosovo.[1] The findings suggest a serious marginalisation of drug addicts, most likely stemming from the highly negative social perceptions about this type of substance abuse. International reports, as well as a general local consensus, suggest that narcotics are a common problem throughout Kosovo, particularly in the north. Stakeholders who met with ECMI also highlighted a lack of addiction rehabilitation facilities as a weakness in current healthcare.

Data Collection

Drug use in Kosovo appears to be on the rise,[2] though little is being done to address the issue. Some sources speculate that in Kosovo there are roughly 6,000 problematic drug users,[3] defined as an injecting drug user (IDU) or those that regularly use opiates, cocaine and/or amphetamines.[4] Other sources cite 15,000 drug users in total, with about 5,000 of those naming heroin as their drug of choice.[5] Those in the field suggest the numbers are significantly higher.[6] Though there is a lack of concrete numbers, experts assume that drug use has steadily been on the rise in recent years.[7] The disparity between sources highlights the absence of information on drug use in Kosovo. As will be discussed, lack of treatment

[1] ECMI Kosovo, 'Socioeconomic Conditions in Northern Kosovo: Perceptions about Healthcare, Education, Social Welfare and Employment', p. 19
[2] Kathryn Leafe and Martina Melis, 'Mapping of Drug Treatment Provision in Prishtina: gaps in service provision, un-met needs, assessment of workforce development priorities and recommendations for action', December 2006.
[3] http://www.kosova-sot.info/te_tjera/kronika_e_zeze/9-persona-vdiqen-sivjet-nga-droga
[4] EMCDDA, http://www.emcdda.europa.eu/publications/country-overviews/xk
[5] EMCDDA, http://www.emcdda.europa.eu/publications/country-overviews/xk
[6] Kathryn Leafe and Martina Melis, 'Mapping of Drug Treatment Provision in Prishtina: gaps in service provision, un-met needs, assessment of workforce development priorities and recommendations for action', December 2006.
[7] NGO Labyrinth interview, 10 February 2014.

options and the stigma against drug users also contribute to the inadequate data on the topic.

Access to Treatment

Limited options exist for substance abuse treatment in Kosovo, with NGO Labyrinth and the Psychiatric Clinic of the University Clinical Centre of Kosovo being the main sources of treatment. However, these services do not reach all of the country, notably lacking in northern Kosovo. Primary healthcare providers generally do not participate in the treatment of substance abuse, due to limited knowledge in the field of drug treatment.[8]

In order to combat drug use, the Government of Kosovo has adopted a National Drug Strategy;[9] however, there has been difficulty in its implementation due to limited resources and a lack of initiative to tackle substance abuse issues.[10] One study concludes, *"less than half of the IDU have ever received treatment and the majority of treatment has been detoxification services."*[11] This statistic demonstrates the virtual absence of aftercare services, which has a significant impact on the probability of drug users to relapse. Although no current data exists on the relapse rate, the lack of aftercare services in Kosovo fosters an environment in which relapse is common. NGO Labyrinth reflects that Kosovo maintains highest relapse rate when compared to regional countries.[12]

Among NGO Labyrinth's clients, 7% are Kosovo Serbs, while 0.83% are Serbs from Serbia, 3% of clients come from Roma, Ashkali and Gorani communities, 2% are Bosniak and 86% are Albanians.[13] Generally, minorities have equal access to treatment services, with the exception of Mitrovica/Mitrovicë North. Because of the absence of rule of law in northern Kosovo, new groups of Serbs escaping the law emerged and drug smuggling became more rampant. As drug use grew, treatment centres were unable to materialize due to the lack of control Kosovo institutions maintained over the north. Until today, there has been no initiative by the Kosovo government to increase substance abuse treatment availability in Mitrovica/Mitrovicë North.[14]

The stigma attached to drug use, discussed below, also influences treatment options. Stigmatization prevents drug users from seeking treatment (when it is available), which hinders the numbers of users who pursue treatment, ultimately impacting the known numbers of drug users.[15] Thus, users often seek help in neighbouring countries to avoid being classified as an addict.[16] Many Albanians enter treatment programs in Macedonia and Albania and some Serbs go to Belgrade for assistance.

Social Stigma

[8] EMCDDA, http://www.emcdda.europa.eu/publications/country-overviews/xk
[9] Found at the following link: http://www.mpb-ks.org/repository/docs/strategjia_16_06_09_finale_kombetare_ENG.pdf
[10] NGO Labyrinth interview, 10 February 2014.
[11] WHO, UNICEF, UNFPA, 'Psychoactive Substance Use in Kosovo: Rapid Assessment and Response with Youth, Injecting Drug Users and Prisoners', May 2009.
[12] NGO Labyrinth interview, 10 February 2014.
[13] NGO Labyrinth interview, 10 February 2014.
[14] NGO Labyrinth interview, 10 February 2014.
[15] WHO, UNICEF, UNFPA, 'Psychoactive Substance Use in Kosovo: Rapid Assessment and Response with Youth, Injecting Drug Users and Prisoners', May 2009.
[16] NGO Labyrinth interview, 10 February 2014.

The stigma towards drug users in Kosovo is similar to the perception of drug use worldwide. Drug use is viewed as a self-inflicting 'evil',[17] placing blame on addicts and preventing empathy from mainstream society. Even healthcare professionals perpetuate the stigmatization of drug users. For example, many doctors do not embrace harm reduction programs, claiming that needle exchange programs encourage drug use and methadone maintenance still allows addicts to remain on drugs.[18] Doctors also refrain from being associated with assisting drug users. Many refuse to be seen entering NGO Labyrinth due to its direct affiliation with drug users.

For members of minority communities, who are already marginalised, being labelled as a drug user generates a double stigma – both for their ethnic background and their drug use. Drug users, already a marginalised group in society with limited access to proper services, become even more vulnerable through this stigmatization.

Though tensions still arise between members of different communities, drug users from distinct communities tend to have better relations than the mainstream population, which was even more apparent immediately following the 1999 conflict.[19] This may be attributed to the stigma, which causes users to cooperate through a sense of brotherhood and understanding when faced with discrimination.

In order for substance abuse treatment to be successfully implemented in Kosovo, it first needs to be accepted as a problem among society.[20] The stigma against drug users often prevents the government and the general population from accepting that drug use is a serious issue that inflicts harm both in drug users and society as a whole. Rather, many claim that it is an individual concern and society at large is not responsible for addressing the topic. However, the effects of drug use on the users themselves and society as a whole are substantial.

Conclusion

Overall, substance abuse is a growing problem in Kosovo and considering the environment, it has the potential to continue to expand.[21] Numerous flaws exist within the health system and treatment has not been prioritised, despite the increase in drug use. To combat drug use and treat those affected by it, it is imperative that the government conducts research about drug use in Kosovo and analyses where resources would be most effective. ECMI Kosovo is of the opinion that a successful strategy must adequately address the cultural context of Kosovo and incorporate all communities in order to effectively combat stigmatisation.

[17] The 1961 Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs refers to drug addiction as a 'serious evil'.
[18] NGO Labyrinth interview, 10 February 2014.
[19] NGO Labyrinth interview, 10 February 2014.
[20] NGO Labyrinth interview, 10 February 2014.
[21] WHO, UNICEF, UNFPA, 'Psychoactive Substance Use in Kosovo: Rapid Assessment and Response with Youth, Injecting Drug Users and Prisoners', May 2009.

INFORMATIONAL BULLETIN

About ECMI Kosovo

ECMI Kosovo is the principal non-governmental organisation engaged with minority issues in Kosovo, with the overarching aim to develop inclusive, representative, community-sensitive institutions that support a stable multi-ethnic Kosovo. ECMI Kosovo contributes to the developing, strengthening and implementation of relevant legislation, supports the institutionalisation of communities-related governmental bodies, and enhances the capacity of civil society actors and the government to engage with one another in a constructive and sustainable way.

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