

DRUG POLICY

NORDAN DRUG POLICY PLATFORM

The purpose of this platform is to establish a set of common views on drug policy, shared by all NordAN members, and to provide a foundation for NordAN's positions and activities. In this platform, "drugs" refers to illegal drugs and the non-medical use of controlled substances. The platform does not encompass all views and concerns of our members, but concentrates on issues that are of current interest or strategic importance.

NordAN's mission is to advance, in a cooperative framework, both science-based and value-based approaches to key aspects of drug policy in the Nordic and Baltic region. Our work is pragmatic and incremental, while remaining guided by clear principles.

THE DRUG PROBLEM

The production, trafficking, and distribution of illegal drugs, and the non-medical use of controlled substances, cause serious harm to health, families, and communities, and contribute to crime and exploitation. Drug use and drug dependence can restrict people's freedom and life opportunities, particularly among children and young people. The drug problem also undermines social cohesion and sustainable development, placing a heavy burden on individuals, families, services, and society.

NORDAN'S VALUES

NordAN's core value is to reduce drug use and drug-related harm, and to support conditions that enable people to live healthy lives free from drug dependence and other substance-related problems (including alcohol). Drug-related harm affects not only the individual, but also families, and the wider community. NordAN is guided by compassion for people experiencing drug-related problems, and by solidarity with the families and communities affected.

INTERNATIONAL DRUG POLICY

NordAN supports the UN drug conventions as the international framework for addressing illegal drugs. We support a comprehensive, integrated, and balanced approach that includes prevention, treatment, harm reduction, recovery and social reintegration.

NordAN also recognises that drug policy is linked to sustainable development and to the protection of children's rights. Our work is guided by the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

As a Nordic and Baltic civil society network working in a European context, NordAN follows EU drug policy strategies and action plans closely, and engages in EU processes to contribute a civil society perspective and to advocate for policies consistent with our values and objectives. Drug trafficking, and the related crime and violence, remain a serious concern in our region, including in urban areas.

A comprehensive drug policy aims to reduce the harms caused by illegal drugs and the non-medical use of controlled substances, for individuals, families, and society. This requires coordinated action across sectors, including law enforcement, health and social services, and across the continuum of care from prevention, early intervention, treatment and recovery, harm reduction measures, to effective control of production, trafficking, and distribution. These measures are interconnected and should be implemented across relevant policy areas.

Drug use is influenced by social and psychosocial factors, and both prevention and treatment should therefore include a social dimension. At the same time, drug policy must respond to the realities of today's drug markets, including digitalisation, online sales channels, and social media that can contribute to normalisation and increased demand.

Preventive efforts should be directed towards the general population and tailored to vulnerable groups and people at risk. NordAN also emphasises that social justice and socioeconomic development complement health and law enforcement measures, both in more affluent societies and in less resourced settings.

A comprehensive approach should aim to:

- prevent people from starting to use drugs
- prevent experimental use becoming regular use
- provide early intervention against risky consumption patterns
- ensure access to treatment
- support rehabilitation, recovery, and social reintegration
- reduce drug-related health and social harm, including blood-borne infections and overdoses

NordAN supports the UN conventions on illicit drugs as the basis for prohibiting the production, cultivation, trafficking, and sale of illicit drugs. NordAN supports efforts to reduce illicit production, keeping in mind that supply reduction should be viewed in a wider context of economic, social, and human development, as well as security and stability, and as part of a comprehensive supply reduction strategy.

Harm reduction has an important role in reducing adverse health consequences of drug use, including blood-borne infections and overdoses. Harm reduction and detoxification should be integrated within a comprehensive strategy that also ensures access to treatment, recovery support, and social reintegration. When harm reduction measures are implemented without clear pathways to treatment and recovery, the overall response risks becoming fragmented and less effective.

Drug use and drug dependence can contribute to social exclusion, weaken social cohesion, and hinder development. Prevention efforts should address social vulnerabilities such as poverty and marginalisation, but they must also recognise that drug problems exist even in affluent societies. We cannot wait until all social problems are solved before we address illegal drugs and the harms they cause.

Prevention should therefore be multi-sectoral and sustainable, combining social and educational measures with targeted efforts to delay initiation, reduce experimental use, and prevent risky patterns from becoming entrenched.

Civil society organisations have a crucial role in prevention because they work close to communities and can address cultural, social, and psychosocial drivers of drug-related harm, while also strengthening protective factors such as meaningful activities, belonging, purpose, and self-esteem.

TREATMENT AND RECOVERY WORKS

Recovery, rehabilitation, and social reintegration should remain the focus of a comprehensive treatment system. Treatment should be organised as a continuum, with multiple entry points and services that are available and accessible when needed. Treatment is individual, and people often need to try different forms of support to find what works for them.

Recovery is rarely a straight line. People may need several treatment attempts, and relapse during treatment or recovery does not necessarily mean failure. A pragmatic, patient, recovery-oriented approach is therefore necessary, and services should not give up on anyone.

Effective treatment and recovery support should address both health needs and psychosocial needs. Social integration is both an aim and a key part of recovery. Support should strengthen autonomy and help people rebuild relationships, education or work participation, and stable living conditions. Involving families and close relations can be important where appropriate, and peer support and self-help groups can play a valuable role.

NordAN also emphasises the need for diversity in treatment. A one-size-fits-all approach does not work. Treatment systems should offer a range of options, including community-based and outpatient support as well as more intensive and structured programmes when needed, and should avoid solutions driven mainly by short-term cost incentives.

To make treatment pathways work in practice, services and providers should cooperate and coordinate, so people are not pushed between competing actors and do not fall through gaps in care.

THE ROLE OF LAW ENFORCEMENT

Drug control and law enforcement are important parts of prevention. Reducing access to illegal drugs, and disrupting production, trafficking, and distribution, are necessary to limit availability and protect communities.

All non-medical handling of narcotic drugs should remain illegal. NordAN does not see legalisation as a viable path to reduce drug-related crime or the harms caused by drugs. Developments in some jurisdictions, including cannabis legalisation models, reinforce the need to assess how legal markets affect availability, patterns of use, and harm. NordAN's concern is not only the legal status itself, but also the risk of commercialisation, where a competitive legal market creates strong incentives to expand sales and availability.

Increased availability is likely to increase use and related harm, and can particularly affect children and other vulnerable groups. Preventing sales to minors would remain a major challenge, as it is with alcohol.

Criminal sanctions should be proportionate and used with the aim of preventing harm, including in the interests of the individual, their family, and society. At the same time, sanctions and enforcement applied in isolation can increase marginalisation and make rehabilitation, recovery, and social reintegration more difficult.

Responses to possession and use for personal consumption should be assessed based on the person's situation and needs. A wide range of measures should be available, from warnings and fines to referral to assessment, support services, and treatment. For people with substance dependence, alternatives to punitive sanctions should be available where they can better support recovery and reduce harm.

People in prison with a drug problem should receive proper treatment in prison, with follow-up after release, and where appropriate, treatment should be available as an alternative to prison.

Alternative sanctions

Alternative sanctions should be discussed as part of current drug policy debates, particularly for minor drug offences. Options may include warnings, structured referrals to treatment or support, and administrative or municipal models that aim to reduce harm and prevent escalation, rather than relying only on imprisonment.