

DISCUSSION SPACE SUBMISSION FOR INHSU 2024

RESPONDING TO EVOLVING HARM REDUCTION NEEDS: NEW DRUGS, NEW CHALLENGES, NEW IDEAS

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Background and specific topic for discussion:

In 2021, the sudden and exponential increase in the use of crack cocaine became a significant issue of concern in Geneva, Switzerland. The number of crack use episodes in the drug consumption room (Quai 9) more than doubled from October 2021¹ to October 2022², and open drug scenes reminiscent - albeit to a smaller extent - of the ones in Zurich and Bern in the 1980s, appeared in the streets of the city center.

The use of crack cocaine in Geneva appears to have been especially widespread among an already marginalised population of persons who use drugs, making their often times existing precarious physical, mental and general living conditions even worse and complicating aspects for harm reduction workers in their efforts to best accompany these persons in their drug use and daily lives.

Together with the relevant local authority, Première Ligne (the association which runs the drug consumption room in Geneva), drew up a « Winter emergency action plan » in early 2022 covering aspects such as: ways to manage the open drug scene, providing drug use material, shelter, day care for people who use drugs, increased street work, etc. **A key response element was the opening, on the 1st of February 2022, of the SleepIn programme:** an innovative service which provides overnight shelter at the drug consumption room for men and women who use drugs, along with the possibility of using drugs on site during their stays.

Encouraging discussion and debate:

The main questions to be addressed are: **what does this colossal change in drug consumption patterns, with all that it entails, mean for the future of harm reduction** in situations where, in addition to challenging drug use-related aspects, people who use drugs' basic human needs such as food and shelter come to the forefront and become impossible to ignore?

Promoting dialogue: **How can responses pave the way for more holistic and inclusive drug policies and practices, while also addressing medical, social and political structures and dynamics?** How can actors working in the harm reduction space, together with relevant partners and authorities, **find ways to best respond to the significant social as well as health needs of people who use drugs**, and modify institutional practices to accommodate and provide appropriate services?

Based on its experience and the practices Première Ligne has been putting in place to respond to the "crack epidemic" in Geneva over the past few years, **these questions (and elements of responses) will serve the basis for discussion and sharing of ideas for how to address and overcome similar challenging drug-related situations in various contexts around the world.**

¹ With 758 "passages" in October 2021.

² With 1562 "passages" in October 2022.

Facilitators:

Thomas Herquel (a trained social worker with significant managerial experience, who assumed the role of Director at the association Première Ligne in April 2022, amidst a crisis ; collaborating closely with the committee, the Canton of Geneva, and partners, Thomas addressed human and financial resource challenges, and has revitalized the association into its currently strong operational stance) and Jennifer Hasselgård-Rowe (responsible for scientific matters at Première Ligne; with extensive experience in drug policy, human rights and public health, Jennifer has been a lecturer at the University of Geneva for several years, has worked for drug policy NGOs, for the Global Commission on Drug Policy, UNOHCHR, and has conducted various drug-related research projects), will co-facilitate the discussion.

Together, they bring complementary perspectives to the issue: with Thomas highlighting managerial and operational points, particularly in relation to collaboration with local authorities and certain political aspects, and Jennifer providing more analytical and scientific detail with regard to drug policy figures and trends, not only linked to the consumption of crack cocaine but to the other social and health-related elements mentioned above as well.

Disclosure of Interest Statement:

The conference collaborators recognise the considerable contribution that industry partners make to professional and research activities. We hereby declare no conflicts of interest in our current work, publications and presentations.