



Users unite

A brief overview
about the drug user movement

Theo van Dam

Colophon

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Editors:

Georg Bröring

Eberhard Schatz

Publisher

Foundation Regenboog AMOC

Correlation Network

Postbus 10887

1001 EW Amsterdam

The Netherlands

Tel. +31 20 5317600

Fax. +31 20 4203528

<http://www.correlation-net.org>

e-mail: info@correlation-net.org

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A brief overview about the drug user movement

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"We are people from around the world who use drugs. We are people who have been marginalized and discriminated. We have been hurt unnecessarily, put in jail, depicted as evil, and stereotyped as dangerous and disposable. Now it is time to raise our voices as to establish our rights and reclaim the right to be our own spokesman striving for self-representation and self empowerment".

(Joergen Kjaer)

4.1. Introduction

Users of illegal drugs traditionally and mostly do not have a strong and heard voice in the matter concerned with them. Policy makers, service providers, health authorities, police and judges usually discuss drug policy and establish the legal and treatment system around drug use. They decide about drug users without taking their voices seriously into account. For many years, users of illegal drugs have developed different methods to get organized and to influence policies and treatment. They fight for the right to get information and the medication they need, for adequate treatment and decriminalisation. They aim to get treated with respect and dignity as every other citizen.

This brief overview describes the history of drug user organisations in particular countries in Europe, with a special focus on the Netherlands, and the development around European drug user movements.

4.2. History of the Dutch drug user movements

Nico Adriaans was the founder and chairman of the first advocacy/activist user group, Rotterdam Junkie Union (RJB) in the Netherlands in 1977. In this capacity, the Rotterdam Junkie Union played an indispensable role in changing the face and character of Dutch drug policy.

“...the Dutch drug user movement was able to push the discourse of the slowly developing local and national drug policies away from “compulsory treatment” and “Verelendungs-philosophies” towards “acceptance,” “pragmatism” and “normalization.”” (Jean-Paul Grund in the Ibogaine dossier¹). Acceptance of drug use and human rights of drug users were the main goals for the Junkie Union.

In 1977, the MDHG, Medical-social service for Heroin users, was initiated in Amsterdam.

A mix of drug users, parents of drug users, social workers and other interested people decided to initiate the MDHG, because they couldn't agree with the social and political answers on the epidemic of heroin users. They were convinced that nobody keeps an eye on heroin users but themselves. The main goal of the MDHG was to fight for the interest

1 The full text can be found on <http://ibogaine.org/adriaans.html>

of drug users, with as topics:

- Social acceptance of drugs and drug users;
- Decriminalisation of the use of drugs; get drugs out of the law;
- De-psychiatric and de-medication of the drug user.

In 1980, there were fifteen local Junkie Unions all over the Netherlands with the same goals, influencing the drug policy. In those days, the Junkie Unions organized themselves as a federation: Federation Netherlands Junkie Unions (FNJB).

The experimental Aids-prevention-project 'No-Risk' started in 1989 with practical prevention interventions for injecting drug users. No Risk, and his users, were the initiators for safe-use and safe-sex training. However, while No-Risk started as an Aids-prevention-project for IV-users, this project changed over time more and more to an interest group of drug users.

In 1992, LSD, the Dutch National Interest Group of Drug Users started as an Aids-prevention-project as well, but had to change this policy after 6 months into an interest group of drug users. LSD was funded by the Dutch Ministry of Health for activities in the Netherlands. One of the main tasks was to create a kind of translation from street voices into policy and the other way around. LSD should bridge the gap between policy and practice. Health promotion for drug users was another main task of the LSD foundation.

In some other countries in Europe drug users started to organise themselves as well:

In Germany, drug users organized themselves in JES, founded in 1992. JES is a national self-help network of and for people who take (or did take) drugs. Keywords are solidarity and acceptance. In France, ASUD was founded in 1992 as well, and it has grown up to a national user organization. At the same time, the Danish Drug User Union in Denmark was organized. The Danish Drug User Union had their key activities in influencing policy makers.

At the end of the 1990's, users started to organize themselves in several other European countries. Some of them were supported by the experience of the "older" groups. In Spain, the user organizations were connected and supported by ASUD France. The Swedish Drug User Union is still cooperating intensely with the Danish Drug User Union. User organizations in Croatia and Slovenia have been supported by the Dutch National

Interest Group of Drug Users for many years.

4.3. International developments

On World Aids Day 1990, Werner Hermann of the Deutsche AIDS Hilfe, arranged a meeting of European professionals and user self help groups - including RJB - in Berlin. Out of this meeting, the European Interest Group of Drug Users (EIGDU) was born. The main aim of this network was to wake up policy-makers, to lobby and encourage them to accelerate the establishment of harm reduction programmes, in particular needle exchange programmes. This was done by many press conferences and later by the book entitled: The Situation for Drug Users in Europe². EIGDU could start their activities, because the Deutsche Aids-Hilfe was willing to provide financial support.

EIGDU also wrote and widely distributed a declaration of 10 action points. EIGDU received professional support from Franz Trautmann of the Dutch Trimbos Institute. During the Verona meeting in 1992, 40 participants from 13 countries came together. The topic at that EIGDU annual meeting was to complete the black-book and to present it to the EIGDU participants. The black-book was a memorandum of the actual situation of drug users in Europe.

In 1994, EIGDU had to stop their activities, due to insufficient funding. However, the idea to organize and contact each other was born. Since the closure of EIGDU, user groups have proliferated all over the world, and in Europe in particular. However, even though user unions from Central Eastern Europe participated in EIGDU, they did not get stronger after EIGDU had to stop its activities. During the period that EIGDU existed, there had been no progress made in organizing drug users from southern Europe.

In 1996, LSD received some funding from the Open Society Institute, in order to support and initiate interest groups of drug users in Central and Eastern Europe. User organizations in Slovenia, Croatia, and the former Russian states received structural support from LSD, not only at the start, but also during their practical work.

² European Interest Group Drug User (1993) Die Situation der drogenbenutzenden. Bevölkerung in Europa. Memorandum Berlin, Deutsche AIDS-Hilfe, 159 p

Small grass roots user organizations in Spain, Italy, Serbia, Macedonia, Slovakia and the Czech Republic were also formed during this period, which were able to consult LSD for practical support with backup from other user organizations in Denmark, France and Germany.

User organizations in Germany, Denmark, France and The Netherlands (countries where at that time, local drug user organizations were in touch through national networks of user organizations) were discussing how to initiate again an international user organisation.

Drug users support each other in the fields of disease prevention, overdose prevention, accessing stabilising and life-saving drugs, i.e. substitution treatment information (methadone & Subutex), about living well; with nutritional tips as well as safer use and safer sex reminders, and by creating a new social justice movement.

The differences in goals and the differences between the national situations and laws made the national groups to decide in 1999 not to initiate a European drug user network again. The main goals should be to influence decisions makers, and drug users should feel the effect of this influence.

As an alternative for the international network, LSD decided to organize an International Drug User Day. Drug users and their organizations could meet and inspire each other. The organization of this IDUD was practical and simple; IDUD should be a congress for drug users; they should learn from each other about safer use, safer sex, about lobbying and how to influence policy makers. Presentations should be made by users from all over Europe. Even non-users could participate in IDUD. In addition to drug users, many social workers from low threshold projects enjoyed participation in the IDUD. Beside that, a lot of policemen were interested in the IDUD happening. For policemen this event was very special moment to get in positive contact with drug users for the very first time.

The IDUD was organized eight times (1995-2003). Every time, it was organized in the Netherlands as an invitational conference. The political situation in the Netherlands (at that time) made it possible to have this event. In 2003, the Danish Drug User Union organized, in cooperation with LSD, IDUD in Denmark. The IDUD always ended the conference with a big party with a band playing up to dance. During the conference and of course during the party, people were permitted to take their favourite drug and show their habits openly. We invited some dealers to service the users gathered at IDUD with a good quality and price relation. For those users who would like to inject, IDUD organized an injection room with a

medical doctor, and for those who would like to smoke, it was allowed to do that and take their drugs in the plenary room. In this plenary room, nurses were available. During all the conferences, we never had any accidents or fatal OD's.

As an extra activity we handed out the so-called Dr. Alderwright Award to honour the most user-friendly initiative of the year. Users from 24 different countries attended the IDUD. For some of them it was a shock to see how open and peaceful this event was possible to be.

Policemen were walking around talking to users, nurses, dealers and social workers. Drugs were seen as a fact and needed to be accepted as a fact – just like drug users.

The IHRA - **International Harm Reduction Association Conferences** - has grown over the last 17 years in popularity and worked as a possible annual gathering point for user activists from most countries. The IHRA has been very supportive, granting scholarships to many user activists, especially from the economically less developed countries. The IHRA conferences have therefore been a very important stage for user advocates and user activists to raise their voices and spread their opinions both publicly and internationally.

4.4. Conclusions

The need to meet each other as drug users from all over the world is still there. We realize that we need a strong and practical drug user movement to create justified drug laws, based on facts instead of emotions.

Since the early beginning of user unions in Europe, there is the need to have a powerful international democratically drug user movement. This international drug user movement needs to have clear goals and should be able to bridge the gap for users all over the world. This international drug user movement needs to have a broad overview about national differences in drug laws and drug scenes. The new international drug user movement needs to create an open discussion about the tasks to be done.

For this:

USERS UNITE!

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