3. New Psychoactive Substances in Kyrgyzstan: Public Health Risks and Policy Responses

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The chapter provides a concise overview of Kyrgyzstan's efforts to effectively address the challenges posed by new psychoactive substances (NPS). It highlights the nation's commitment to public health, emphasising its adaptability and collaboration in navigating the complex landscape of NPS. The text explores the consequences of NPS use, including drug misuse, infections, and mortality, and discusses their economic and societal implications. It outlines the societal responses, including law enforcement measures, non-governmental organizations (NGO) and community engagement, and policy development efforts. Furthermore, it underscores Kyrgyzstan's active role in global anti-drug initiatives, focusing on international cooperation in legislative development. Recommendations include strengthening law enforcement, improving data collection, expanding community-based harm reduction services, enhancing treatment protocols, increasing public awareness, and promoting international cooperation. The chapter also discusses monitoring progress, research, and development.

Historic Background: Drugs in the Kyrgyz Republic

The Kyrgyz Republic has a rich history of actively combating illegal drug trafficking and drug addiction, dating back to the late nineteenth century when issues related to opium poppy cultivation and opium production first emerged (Tugelbaeva/Khamzaeva 2017). Between 1916 and 1974, the country played a prominent global role in industrial medicinal opium production, boasting vast poppy fields covering up to 64 thousand hectares. It contributed around 80% of the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics' (USSR's) medicinal opium production and approximately 16% of the world's legal opium production (ibid.). Unfortunately, a significant portion of this opium entered the illicit market, resulting in widespread drug addiction within the population. As a response to these challenges, a pivotal

decision was made in 1974 to cease the legal cultivation of opium poppy in the Kyrgyz Republic, a decision that additionally dealt with issues related to extensive wild cannabis and ephedra growth, which serve as the raw materials for the production of narcotic drugs such as hashish, marijuana, methcathinone, and ephedrine (ibid.).

Drug-related issues became truly problematic in Central Asia during the 1990s, marking a critical juncture in the region's history. During this period, we witnessed the establishment of drug routes and complex logistics networks for drug supply, and the rise of formidable drug cartels. These drug routes, originating from Afghanistan, traversed a network of passes and gorges, connecting with Central Asian republics including Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan (Bessonov 2024). These routes were adapted to the geographical and infrastructural nuances of the region and various transportation modes for narcotic substances were employed, ranging from rudimentary animal-drawn transport in border areas to sophisticated air transport where feasible.

Since 1993, the criminological situation has deteriorated due to the influx of opioids from Afghanistan into the Central Asian market. There was a significant and steady increase in the trafficking of Afghan opioids until 1997, when another potent semi-synthetic drug, heroin, began to be imported from Afghanistan. The volume of heroin on the drug market surged tenfold within a short period of time (Nogoibaev 2014).

In general, the distribution of these narcotic substances has not only led to an increase in the number of drug users in Kyrgyzstan but has also intensified drug trafficking, sale, and transit.

The year 2016 marked a significant transformation in the drug landscape in Central Asia. Specialised agencies in the region had historically focused on combating drugs of natural origin, amassing expertise in countering their proliferation. However, a seismic shift occurred with the influx of synthetic drugs into the market, rendering these agencies ill-equipped to confront these new challenges effectively (Shamshiev 2016).

The Emergence of Synthetic Drugs in the Kyrgyz Republic

In 2021, in light of the lack of reliable data on synthetic drugs, the Bishkek-based Attika Foundation, the Women's Network of Key Communities, the GLORI Foundation, and the Plus Center Foundation in Osh decided to engage in the collection, monitoring, and analysis of such data. The leaders of

these NGOs coordinate their ongoing monitoring efforts with government structures and international organisations, periodically providing reviews and reports, which we refer to in this chapter.

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) defines NPS as substances not controlled by the Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs (1961) or the Convention on Psychotropic Substances (1971), but still posing a threat to public health (UNODC 2024). The UNODC has identified over 1,000 substances globally that, as of January 2021, were not covered by drug control conventions. Among these substances, those with stimulant effects have exhibited the highest growth rates over the past five years. This diverse group of pharmacotoxic compounds presents challenges in terms of predicting and monitoring their adverse effects due to variations in chemical compositions and usage patterns (UNODC, 2024).

Initially observed in Kazakhstan as early as 2009, the infiltration of NPS into Central Asian illicit markets accelerated over the subsequent decade, coinciding with a decline in the availability of conventional drugs. In the Kyrgyz Republic, instances of NPS usage began to surface in 2013, involving in particular synthetic cannabinoids marketed as 'spice'. By 2014, more than 400 NPS variants had been identified, with the number exceeding 800 by 2020 (Yussopov 2021).

NPS primarily entered Kyrgyzstan from neighbouring countries or via international postal routes from Western Europe. Starting in 2019, law enforcement agencies identified instances of in situ synthesis of NPS and stimulants within Kyrgyzstan, involving precursors and chemical reagents designed for illicit markets. This resulted in an almost threefold increase in the seizure of these precursors during the first half of 2020. Of the substances seized between 2020 and 2023, a substantial proportion comprised 2-(pyrrolidine-1-yl)-1-phenylpentan-1-one (α-pyrrolidinovalerophenone, α-PVP), tetrahydrocannabinol, methcathinone (ephedrone), and mephedrone (Orlova 2023), as well as synthetic cannabinoids.

Simultaneously, synthetic cathinones, known colloquially as 'salts', 'bath salts', or 'crystals', gained prominence in Kyrgyzstan. The first cases of individuals seeking treatment for mental and behavioural disorders associated with NPS, encompassing both synthetic cathinones and synthetic cannabinoids, were documented in 2016–2017 (Yussopov 2021).

In 2019, Kyrgyzstan seized 5.24 kg of synthetic drugs, a quantity that seems relatively inconsequential when compared to the overall volume of other psychoactive substances confiscated during this period. Notably, the Service for Combating Illegal Drug Trafficking in Kyrgyzstan demonstrated

exceptional efficacy over the past three years, successfully confiscating an impressive 15 tons, 951 kilograms, and 729 grams of illicit drugs (Orlova 2023). This constitutes 92.4% of the total volume of drugs seized by internal law enforcement agencies during this time period. Additionally, the Service detected and neutralised 27 covert drug laboratories involved in the illicit production of narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances.

According to data reported by the country's Interior Ministry, in 2023 the law enforcement agencies of Kyrgyzstan seized six tons, 680 kilograms, and 685 grams of narcotic drugs, psychotropic substances, and precursors from illegal circulation. Additionally, 1,314 drug offenses were uncovered, twelve underground drug laboratories were liquidated, the activities of 84 criminal drug groups were suppressed, and 120 wanted persons were detained. For drug-related offenses, 95 persons were brought to responsibility. Cases of the legalisation of proceeds from the illegal drug industry to the value of more than 15 million soms (USD 166,700) were also revealed. Two residential houses and four vehicles belonging to drug traffickers were confiscated as a part of the police interventions (ibid.).

The predominant channel for NPS acquisition continues to be electronic communication platforms, with urban centres such as Osh and Bishkek witnessing the highest prevalence of usage. Telegram stores have emerged as the dominant medium for online drug trafficking, closely followed by WhatsApp and other virtual platforms. In Kyrgyzstan, as well as across all Central Asian nations, electronic communication channels prevail as the primary conduit for diverse population groups to access NPS. Research conducted in Kazakhstan underscores the progressive transition of drug dealers towards traditional contact channels to engage potential consumers. However, it is noteworthy that only one third of NPS users engage in traditional contact transactions. Bishkek, in particular, has firmly established itself as the epicentre of Telegram-based drug commerce. The two most frequently traded substances in the country have been mephedrone and alpha-PVP, with their presence more pronounced outside the urban centres of Osh and Bishkek. Notably, certain pharmaceutical products, such as Trigan-D, Cyclomed, and Lyrica (pregabalin), which yield comparable effects when consumed recreationally, have served as alternatives to NPS (Bessonov/Nikitin 2021).

A salient aspect of drug markets is the deceptive practice of selling synthetic drugs under the guise of conventional substances. The rationale behind this strategic shift lies in the cost-effectiveness of NPS production and distribution. Thus, the country's drug market is undergoing a con-

sistent step-by-step change, characterised by the decreasing availability of traditional drugs, the ever-increasing position of NPS, the diversification of trade channels, and aggressive marketing. The data on the structure of proposed goods and their seizures indicate an increase in the share of synthetic stimulants in the sales and consumption of various key populations. Electronic trading methods have led to the activation of contactless payment systems.

In conclusion, NPS are becoming one of the more dangerous problems affecting various aspects of life in the Kyrgyz Republic.

The Consequences and Harms of NPS Use (Overdoses, Infections, and Crime)

The consequences stemming from the use of NPS are multifaceted, encompassing drug misuse, the transmission of infections through non-sterile injection equipment and unprotected sex, and mortality arising from both direct and indirect causes. These repercussions have wide-ranging implications, including increased healthcare costs, economic losses, and a range of negative impacts on the families of people who use drugs.

One pivotal measure for assessing drug-related harm is the number of drug-related deaths (DRD) associated with NPS. These statistics are crucial when it comes to carrying out risk assessments, cost evaluations of illegal drugs, epidemiological research, and policy deliberations (Mravcik et al. 2014).

Despite the absence of readily available data on DRDs in the Kyrgyz Republic, government officials prioritise addressing and reducing such incidents. One factor that contributes to the lack of data on NPS poisoning in the Kyrgyz Republic is the limited laboratory capacity of forensic organisations, which currently focus on qualitative determinations of metabolites from 'traditional' drugs in biological fluids (Alymbaeva et al. 2020).

Furthermore, the Toxicology Service, responsible for emergency care in cases of substance poisoning, lacks analysers capable of identifying NPS and their metabolites. Fatalities are also recorded in connection with 'traditional' non-synthetic drugs. These observations may indicate the limited capacity of the system to record and verify fatalities, especially when establishing a clear causal link is essential (Alymbaeva et al. 2020).

According to Bessonov and Nikitin (2021), polydrug use is prevalent among NPS users, with 81% of toxicology cases involving multiple substances. In nearly half of these cases, controlled substances like

methamphetamine or cocaine were detected, and medicines and alcohol were present in 82% of post-mortem cases. Moreover, 19% of post-mortem cases involved the use of multiple NPS.

One significant adverse effect associated with the use of synthetic stimulants is an increased risk of human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and other sexually transmitted infections (STI) (Bessonov/Nikitin 2021). Numerous studies have established a link between synthetic stimulant use and HIV infection, even when injection is not the sole mode of transmission. International guidelines emphasise the importance of integrated assessments for individuals using NPS or synthetic stimulants to enhance service provision.

The most substantial NPS usage and related harms are observed among young people, particularly in the 18–25 age group. Surveys consistently reveal a higher percentage of drug users among young individuals compared to older age groups. The critical period for NPS use typically begins in early adolescence and extends into late adolescence (Yussopov 2021).

Between 2016 and 2017, individuals began seeking treatment for mental and behavioural disorders resulting from the use of NPS, including synthetic cathinones and synthetic cannabinoids. According to the Republican Center for Psychiatry and Narcology, there were 500 cases of potent drug consumption recorded in 2023, with a significant portion involving individuals aged 14 to 18 (Yussopov 2021).

In addition to crimes directly related to the use and distribution of NPS, it's important to note instances of thefts committed by young people involving money and jewellery. Initially, these thefts often occur within homes, but they subsequently expand to unattended places. In extreme cases, physical harm caused during theft or street assaults or through involvement in criminal groups as one-time perpetrators are notable concerns (Bakirova 2024).

The Response of Society, Community-Based Agencies, and Political Institutions to the Emergence of New Drugs

The emergence of NPS in Kyrgyzstan has led to a significant increase in activities across various social groups. The country has witnessed advancements in technical capabilities for drug detection and seizure, alongside efforts to introduce innovative methods to assist individuals struggling with addiction and their immediate communities.

In the Kyrgyz Republic, law enforcement agencies have specialised units dedicated to combatting illicit drug trafficking. They carry out their operations through various means, including safeguarding the state border, monitoring imported goods and individuals entering the country, and participating in joint international operations involving the controlled delivery of drugs, psychotropic substances, and precursors. Notably, the Anti-Drug Trafficking Service of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Kyrgyz Republic has strategically incorporated drones into their operations as a tool to combat the illicit drug trade. The ministry's press service officially reported this significant shift in strategy.

Furthermore, a noteworthy development occurred as the Head of the Anti-Drug Trafficking Service of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Kyrgyz Republic actively engaged in a regional experts' meeting focused on unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) and cutting-edge technologies. This meeting took place in Karakol City, Kyrgyzstan and underscored the commitment of local authorities to harness modern innovations in their fight against drug-related issues (International Narcotic Control Board 2017).

Another notable trend in response to the NPS challenge is the increasing influence of organisations dedicated to assisting individuals grappling with the consequences of NPS misuse. Between 2021 and 2023, over 180 international events were convened to strengthen cooperation and foster new partnerships with foreign governmental bodies and international organisations. These collaborative efforts aimed to collectively combat drug trafficking and address the multifaceted challenges posed by NPS (UNODC 2023).

To explore the potential for multisectoral collaborations among governmental agencies, non-governmental organisations, academic institutions, and research centres, with a specific focus on understanding the NPS landscape and enhancing the accessibility and effectiveness of services for NPS users, a conference entitled 'Finding Effective Solutions to the Problem of New Psychoactive Substances in Kyrgyzstan: Review of Multisectoral Partnerships of Communities, Scientists, and Practitioners' was organised with support from the UNODC Programme Office in the Kyrgyz Republic and the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) Country Envelopes Fund (Finding Effective Solutions 2021). This conference brought together key stakeholders and experts, including the Attika Foundation, the Plus Center Foundation, and the Global Research Institute (GLORI) Foundation. Forty-six experts, specialists, and representatives from international organisations across Central Asia participated, gaining valuable insights into the NPS landscape within Kyrgyzstan and the broad-

er region. The conference served as an essential platform for in-depth discussions on strategies to enhance access to treatment and effective services for individuals grappling with drug-related challenges.

In his presentation at the mentioned conference, Mr Sergei Bessonov, the head of the Attika Foundation, shed light on the factors contributing to the distribution of NPS within Kyrgyzstan. To facilitate the provision of comprehensive assistance, encompassing medical, psychological, and social support, to individuals suspected of or diagnosed with NPS abuse, the UNODC initiated a study in 2019, which explored the mechanisms of interaction between actors involved in the delivery of services to people with NPS addiction. In addition, regular monitoring assessments conducted by the Attika Foundation together with partner organisations have revealed a relationship between the quality of this interaction (for example, with municipal ambulance services, parent activists, law enforcement agencies, etc.) and the level of satisfaction that people with disabilities and NPS addiction express regarding the quality of the services they received. Efforts to introduce gender-specific services also have a significant impact on this indicator (UNODC 2023). This comprehensive effort culminated in having developed the Clinical Guidelines for Assisting Adult Drug Users of New Psychoactive Substances and a new clinical protocol on NPS approved by the Ministry of health in 2024. These invaluable resources are being integrated into the operational framework of medical institutions.

Additionally, Mr Danil Nikitin, Director of the Global Research Institute (GLORI) Foundation, emphasised the concerns expressed by drug-addicted girls and women during focus group discussions. These individuals lamented that their addiction often went unnoticed by family members and friends for extended periods. Consequently, it is imperative to recognise that heightened awareness and the active involvement of the close relatives of substance users constitute a critical response to the emergence of NPS. With the increased availability of more affordable drugs on the market, the risk of them being used by young people has significantly risen (UNODC 2023).

To address this growing challenge, Kyrgyzstan has initiated numerous programmes aimed at educating and informing young people about the risks associated with drug use. For example, the Strengthening Families Program, also known as SFP 10-14, represents a skill-building initiative targeting parents, youth, and families. Its primary objective is to prevent substance abuse and related behavioural problems among teenagers. This programme was piloted in Bishkek, Kyrgyz Republic, in close collaboration

with the Ministry of Education and Science and the Republican Center of Drug Misuse of the Ministry of Healthcare, with funding support provided by the European Union. The initial phase of SFP implementation involved a comprehensive four-day training workshop held in Bishkek from 27th to 30th March 2018 (UNODC 2018). During this workshop, 26 teachers and school psychologists from three schools received specialised training under the direct supervision of two international SFP experts to prepare them to work as national SFP trainers.

Legislative Developments in the Field of Countering NPS

The Kyrgyz Republic, as a full member of the United Nations, is committed to upholding the political principles declared by the UN General Assembly. In addition, it aligns with the decisions made by the Commission on Narcotic Drugs, follows the guidelines provided by the International Narcotics Control Board, and complies with recommendations from the World Health Organization (WHO).

In 1994, the Kyrgyz Republic ratified key international conventions, including the Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs of 1961, the Convention on Psychotropic Substances of 1971, and the United Nations Convention against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances of 1988.

The country's anti-drug legislation adopts a public health approach towards drug users, viewing them as individuals in need of treatment rather than as criminals. Consequently, criminal law does not encompass the notion of 'responsibility for use'; however, it does impose liability for the unlawful manufacture, acquisition, possession, transportation, or trafficking of narcotic substances, psychotropic substances, or their analogues. Chapter 14 of the Code of Offenses, comprising sections 96 to 101, delineates the legal framework governing breaches of control within the sphere of narcotic substances, psychotropic substances, their analogues, or their precursors.

Article 96 stipulates penalties for the illicit manufacturing, acquisition, possession, transportation, or trafficking of narcotic substances, psychotropic substances, or analogues without intent for distribution. Article 97 specifies the accountability for neglecting measures to eradicate wild-growing drug-containing plants by individuals overseeing land plots or engaging in the cultivation of prohibited drug-containing crops. Article 98 addresses

instances of contravening regulations concerning the production and circulation of narcotic and psychotropic substances, their analogues, or their precursors. Article 99 outlines the liability for violating the protocol for the destruction of narcotic and psychotropic substances, their analogues, or their precursors. Article 100 prescribes penalties for breaches of the inventory procedure regarding narcotic and psychotropic substances, or their analogues. Article 101 pertains to cases involving incitement to use and the advertisement (including graffiti placement in public areas) of narcotic substances, psychotropic substances, or their precursors, as well as plants containing narcotic substances, psychotropic substances, their precursors or their constituent parts, along with new potentially hazardous psychoactive substances.

To address the growing issue of NPS, in 2018 Kyrgyzstan made significant legislative changes. These changes were incorporated into both the Law 'On Narcotic Drugs, Psychotropic Substances, and Precursors' and the Decree of the Kyrgyz Republic Government #535. Notably, the National List of Drugs, Psychotropic Substances, and Their Precursors Subject to Control in Kyrgyzstan was expanded to include 120 new formulas, including cathinones, alpha-PVP, and mephedrone (Ministry of Justice of KR 2019).

In January 2019, a comprehensive legal reform was enacted to humanise justice and amend repressive measures within criminal law. However, these reforms did not impact the articles related to drugs and HIV. As a result, the previous Penal Code of the Kyrgyz Republic became obsolete, and penalties for drug-related offenses involving small amounts without the intent of sale were transferred to the realm of 'misdemeanours', with fines and restrictions of freedom as consequences.

In the legal framework of the Kyrgyz Republic, the consumption of narcotics or psychotropic substances in public spaces is equated with the consumption of alcoholic beverages. Sanctions for such infractions are delineated in Article 127 (Chapter 17) of the Code of Administrative Offenses, entitled 'Use of narcotic drugs or psychotropic substances without medical indications, consumption of alcoholic beverages in public places'. Consequently, minor transgressions regarding the circulation of narcotic drugs, psychotropic substances, their analogues, or their precursors, as well as breaches of public order (such as the consumption of narcotic drugs or psychotropic substances in public spaces), have been declassified, as stipulated by the Code of Administrative Offenses of the Kyrgyz Republic.

Contrarily, the Criminal Code of the Kyrgyz Republic (Chapter 36) addresses criminal responsibility for offenses concerning the distribution of narcotic drugs, psychotropic substances, their analogues, and their precursors. In Chapter 37 of the Criminal Code of the Kyrgyz Republic, provisions exist for crimes against public health. We are specifically interested in two sections of this chapter: Article 292 ('Illegal trafficking of potent or poisonous substances for the purpose of sale') and Article 293 ('Illegal trafficking of potent or poisonous substances'). All aforementioned offenses, contingent upon aggravating circumstances and qualifying factors, incur penalties of imprisonment and fines of varying categories. The amounts of the fines and the terms of imprisonment are determined by the legislator in Articles 65 and 67 of the Criminal Code of the Kyrgyz Republic. Fines are calculated in conditional units and range from USD 225 to USD 2,225. Imprisonment for the enumerated offenses and crimes, contingent upon their classification, varies from six months to 15 years.

In March 2024, President of Kyrgyzstan Sadyr Japarov signed the Law on Narcotic Drugs, Psychotropic Substances, their Analogues and Precursors (Kudryavtseva 2024). The document was adopted by the Parliament on January 24, 2024.

The law, among other measures, provides for regulation of relations in the sphere of trafficking in narcotic drugs, psychotropic substances, their analogues and precursors, as well as living organisms containing them that demonstrates innovative approach in combating the NPS.

The legal framework for health, healthcare, and related systems in Kyrgyzstan is primarily governed by the Law of the Kyrgyz Republic, 'On Public Health', enacted in 2009. While this law does not explicitly mention psychoactive substances, its provisions are closely tied to public health, making it relevant to issues related to psychoactive substance use and the rights of individuals who use drugs, including access to healthcare services (Attika Foundation 2023).

Treatment protocols for young people with NPS addiction in Kyrgyzstan are outlined in a unified protocol entitled 'Treatment of Mental and Behavioural Disorders Resulting from the Use of New Psychoactive Substances in Children and Adolescents', ratified in 2017. A corresponding protocol for the adult population is currently under development.

In a proactive response intended to combat drug addiction and its associated consequences, the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic approved the Anti-Drug Programme, along with its Action Plan, for implementation from 2022 to 2026, with a special focus on NPS. These measures aim to

reduce the prevalence of drug addiction and its negative outcomes in the population (Kyrgyz National Statistics Committee 2024).

Amendments to the Criminal Code to address pharmacy drug abuse were initiated in 2023, with the bill submitted for public discussion. The bill seeks to criminalise the inducement to consume substances classified as potent medicines and improve legislative norms for countering illicit drug trafficking.

International Cooperation in Legislative Development

The Kyrgyz Republic has maintained a steadfast commitment to an anti-drug policy since gaining independence in 1991, recognising the pivotal role of international cooperation in addressing the global drug trade. To combat this issue effectively, the country has established a comprehensive system of international coordination. Cooperation with the international structures is carried out within the framework of the common fight against narcotic and psychotropic substances, which include synthetic drugs.

In 1994, the Kyrgyz Republic became a signatory to major international conventions on drug control, formalising its participation in the global anti-drug framework. This collaboration extends to esteemed organisations such as the International Narcotics Control Board (INCB), UNODC, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), WHO, and UNAIDS.

The Kyrgyz Republic actively engages in both bilateral and multilateral international agreements involving various governmental and interagency levels to combat illicit drug trafficking. Notably, the country's accession to the International Criminal Police Organization (INTERPOL) marked a significant achievement.

Within the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), internal affairs agencies coordinate their anti-drug efforts through the Office for Coordination of the Fight against Organized Crime and Dangerous Crimes (OCFOCDC), established in 1993. Additionally, the formation in 2005 of a Coordinating Council of heads of competent Authorities, designed to combat drug trafficking within the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), has bolstered efforts against drug-related issues.

The Kyrgyz Republic's anti-drug initiatives include developing draft strategies and action plans for drug prevention, joint preventive operations, conferences, working group sessions, and the exchange of vital information within the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO).

In collaboration with the United Nations, the Kyrgyz Republic participates in an annual international operation to prevent the illicit manufacturing of heroin (TARCET). Furthermore, the country has been actively involved in anti-drug activities under the Central Asia Drug Action Programme (CADAP) in cooperation with the European Union. The Kyrgyz Republic is also a member of the International Drug Enforcement Conference (IDEC), a global alliance of 91 countries working to fight against illicit drug trafficking.

Recognising the escalating drug threat, the Kyrgyz Republic, in partnership with neighbouring countries, signed a memorandum of understanding on regional cooperation in drug control. This led to the establishment of the Central Asian Regional Information and Coordination Centre (CARICC), which focuses on organising, conducting, and coordinating joint international operations to combat illicit drug trafficking.

The Kyrgyz Republic's National Security Concept emphasises regional integration and prioritises combating international terrorism, drug trafficking, and various socio-economic and environmental challenges as key regional concerns.

The Kyrgyz Republic's approach to addressing drug-related issues adheres to the principles of comprehensiveness and balance, aligning with universally accepted principles and objectives enshrined in the United Nations Charter and international drug control conventions. This approach emphasises the importance of international cooperation in disrupting drug trafficking routes from producers to end users.

Medical and Harm Reduction Services in the Context of New Psychoactive Drugs

Under Kyrgyz law, individuals with mental disorders due to psychoactive substance use (according to the International Classification of Diseases, Tenth Revision (ICD-10)) are referred to the Republican Center for Psychiatry and Narcology (RCPN) in Bishkek and its branch in Osh, which provide standard public drug treatment services to all patients with chemical addiction, including minors. The most common service provided is detoxification. The RCPN work is guided by the Clinical Protocol for the Care of Children and Adolescents, which includes a section on NPS overdoses, reflecting the frequent occurrence of such cases. Common symptoms

of NPS overdose include impaired consciousness, cardiovascular and respiratory failure, nausea, vomiting, and convulsions.

There are no specialised clinics in the country that could position themselves as resources specifically for working with NPS users. Rehabilitation services for people with NPS dependence are provided in private rehabilitation centres, most of which are located in Bishkek. The cost of their services varies from USD 700 to USD 1,000 per month and is barely affordable for ordinary patients. Many of the patients at these rehabilitation centres come from Kazakhstan, Russia, and Ukraine. Services for minors are not provided at these centres, at least not officially. Psychotherapy is also practised at both public drug treatment clinics and private rehabilitation centres.

Compared to other countries in the region, Kyrgyzstan offers extensive harm reduction services designed primarily for people who use opioids, their peers, and their family members. It is well-recognised that drug use contributes to the spread of serious infections like HIV, tuberculosis, and hepatitis. In 2013, Kyrgyzstan established 48 needle exchange points nationwide, including seven within the penitentiary system. Furthermore, concerted efforts have been undertaken to reduce mortality associated with drug use, which accounted for 2% of fatalities in 2013 (International Narcotic Control Board 2017). However, Kyrgyzstan currently lacks harm reduction and overdose prevention programmes designed explicitly for NPS users (EHRA 2021).

Community-based agencies engaged in prevention and harm reduction have expressed concerns about their limited involvement in addressing the needs of NPS users in treatment, care, and rehabilitation. The opportunity to involve the communities themselves was there when the Community Advisory Boards were formed under government agencies, including the Ministry of Health and the RCPN. However, in 2021, when it was decided to cancel them, this window of opportunity closed and no legitimate alternative to the supervisory board of the RCPN was proposed. Understanding of the risks associated with most NPS is currently limited, due to a lack of comprehensive studies. Nonetheless, various sources suggest that NPS can pose significant health hazards, a fact well-known to most people who use NPS. The chemical addiction treatment system plays a crucial role in providing medical and social assistance to individuals with a history of NPS or stimulant use (EHRA 2021).

Given that the RCPN in Bishkek and its branch in Osh have witnessed a growing number of cases linked to NPS-induced mental disorders, there

is clearly a need to include NPS-related data in information collection forms, a matter currently under consideration by the Central Health and the National Statistical Committee.

The absence of services aimed at disseminating information on NPS overdose prevention is a significant concern. Both government and NGO sector professionals highlight the fact that there is a lack of the knowledge and skills needed to assist individuals with NPS use disorders. Research on the risks, consequences, dosages, and care for NPS users is almost non-existent.

In 2022, a pioneering web outreach initiative took place in Kyrgyzstan, centred in Bishkek, spearheaded by the Attika Foundation (Bessonov 2022). This comprehensive endeavour, which included meticulous planning and execution, aimed to bridge gaps in mental health services, particularly targeting individuals with substance use disorders. Through this initiative, a dedicated website was established, offering valuable resources and support to those in need. Additionally, preventive care packages were procured and distributed, enriching the outreach efforts.

Crucially, the implementation of this project received essential backing from the Global Fund, enabling focused support for individuals grappling with drug addiction, especially those who inject substances. Building upon the success of this endeavour, community advocacy efforts yielded significant progress. With vital support from the Elton John Foundation in 2023, a complementary project was launched to extend support to individuals who use non-injectable drugs. Drawing on the positive outcomes observed in neighbouring Kazakhstan, the project's conceptualisation emphasised culturally sensitive and evidence-based interventions.

Regrettably, despite its noble objectives, the current execution of this project falls short due to insufficient engagement with affected communities and community-based agencies dedicated to supporting men-who-have-sex-with-men (MSM) populations. This oversight highlights the critical need for more inclusive planning and implementation strategies.

To address these challenges and enhance capacity, a series of training seminars were organised throughout the country, facilitated by esteemed national and international experts such as Sergei Bessonov, Nikolay Unguryanu, and Alexey Lahov. These sessions aimed to empower frontline workers with updated knowledge and skills, fostering a more responsive and empathetic approach to mental health and substance use issues.

It's worth noting that while the broader landscape of HIV services has seen limited evolution in recent years, efforts within the aforementioned

project, supported by the Elton John Foundation, have yielded tangible benefits. Beneficiaries now have improved access to essential resources such as condoms, lubricants, and other harm reduction tools, underscoring the project's potential to positively impact public health outcomes.

In summary, the existing services for NPS users in the drug treatment system closely resemble those for other drug use disorders. The authors strongly believe that regular monitoring and evaluation of existing clinical protocols to improve them further and update them in line with the current situation will significantly help the system to apply the up-to-date services for NPS users.

Conclusion

While Kyrgyzstan has made significant strides in providing harm reduction services primarily designed for individuals using opioids, there is an opportunity for further improvement by involving community-based services in addressing the needs of NPS users. Additionally, there is room to enhance the understanding of the specific risks associated with NPS use through comprehensive studies.

Addressing the complex challenges posed by NPS in Kyrgyzstan calls for a collaborative effort involving a wide range of stakeholders, including law enforcement agencies, NGOs, and international partners. By increasing awareness, training and education, and tailoring harm reduction services specifically to NPS users, we can effectively mitigate the evolving risks associated with these substances.

The authors emphasise the importance of ongoing monitoring and evaluation of existing clinical protocols. This will allow for necessary enhancements and updates to better adapt to the changing landscape and meet the demands of emerging drug challenges, ensuring a more responsive system.

Recommendations:

1. Strengthen law enforcement efforts:
   - Continue and enhance law enforcement efforts to combat NPS trafficking and production within the country.
   - Increase cooperation with neighbouring countries, particularly Russia and China, to curb the inflow of NPS into Kyrgyzstan.

- Consider further legislative measures to address the production, trafficking, and possession of NPS, keeping pace with the evolving nature of these substances.

2. Enhance data collection and research:
   - Invest in improved data collection and research to better understand the NPS landscape within the country.
   - Develop specialised epidemiological algorithms to systematically monitor and analyse NPS addiction cases and regional trends.
   - Collaborate with international organisations and research institutions to conduct comprehensive studies on NPS, including their risks, consequences, dosages, and care.
   - Recognise the changing drug scene and allocate resources to adapt harm reduction services to the needs of NPS users.
   - Develop specialised harm reduction and overdose prevention programmes tailored to NPS users.
   - Provide training and education to both state-sector and non-state-sector professionals to equip them with the knowledge and skills needed to assist individuals with NPS use disorders.
3. Improve treatment protocols:
   - Develop clear and comprehensive treatment protocols for individuals diagnosed with NPS use disorders, both for children and adolescents and for the adult population.
   - Ensure that treatment centres are equipped to handle cases related to NPS-induced mental disorders.
   - Consider integrating patients with evidence of NPS use into existing drug dependence treatment methods, such as methadone maintenance therapy, which should have clear guidelines on how they are to be managed and should be designed taking gender-specific needs into account.
4. Increase public awareness:
   - Launch public awareness campaigns to educate the general population, particularly young people, about the risks associated with NPS use.
   - Collaborate with schools and educational institutions, as well as with parents of young drug users to incorporate drug education programmes, emphasising the dangers of NPS, into the curriculum.
   - Promote community-based initiatives aimed at raising awareness about the consequences of drug use and encouraging individuals to seek help when needed.

5. Strengthen international cooperation:
   - Continue active engagement with international organisations, neighbouring countries, and regional initiatives to combat the illicit drug trade and address NPS-related challenges.
   - Explore opportunities for joint international operations and information sharing to disrupt drug trafficking routes.
   - Consider participating in relevant international programmes and conferences to learn from best practices and share experiences with other nations facing similar issues.
6. Monitor and evaluate progress:
   - Establish a monitoring and evaluation framework to assess the effectiveness of various initiatives and policies addressing NPS-related problems.
   - Regularly review and update strategies and action plans to remain relevant and aligned with emerging trends.
7. Promote research and development:
   - Encourage research and development efforts to identify innovative solutions for detecting and addressing NPS-related issues.
   - Explore the use of technology and advanced analytical methods to stay ahead of the evolving nature of NPS.
8. Collaborate with NGOs and civil society:
   - Foster collaboration with NGO dedicated to harm reduction, prevention, and rehabilitation to leverage their expertise and resources in addressing NPS challenges.
   - Engage civil society organisations in awareness campaigns and community-based initiatives to promote a holistic approach to tackling NPS problems.
9. Invest in laboratory and forensic capabilities:
   - Strengthen the capacity of forensic organisations and the Toxicology Service to identify NPS and their metabolites in biological fluids.
   - Provide continuous training for engaged professionals throughout their working careers, thus ensuring supportive conditions to avoid burnout.
   - Invest in advanced laboratory equipment and analytical techniques to enhance the accuracy of NPS detection and analysis.

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