



Section IV

Comparative Executive Summary

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The incredible wealth of information collected by the three research teams participating in the study shows that, in spite of the fact that the synthetic drug markets analysed have developed in extremely different urban contexts and under the influence of a broad range of political, social and cultural circumstances, they exhibit several similar trends, altogether with a number of peculiar patterns.

Although it is almost impossible to draw any firm and definite conclusions on the extremely fluid and multifaceted phenomena investigated during this one-year project, its major findings are highlighted in comparative terms into this final part of the report.

General background: social, economic and cultural characteristics of the three cities

The three cities significantly differ not only in size and geographical location, but also in their economic, social and cultural characteristics. Barcelona is the largest city (around 1.5 million inhabitants), followed by Turin (900,000 inhabitants) and Amsterdam (735,000). Both Barcelona and Amsterdam share the same atmosphere and international air of the major European capitals, while Turin – which still keeps the vestiges of its past as former capital – plays a major role in the national industrial and business scene. As one of the major pole of the so-called Italian “Industrialised Triangle”, Turin’s economy is traditionally oriented towards the automobile sector, while both Barcelona and Amsterdam have more mixed economies which include financial and business services, tourism and trade.

Turin is currently facing an economic crisis related to a difficult phase of the post-industrialisation process, with growing unemployment and social tensions. In Amsterdam, unemployment has considerably decreased during the past decade and it currently amounts to 4%. Barcelona, after the peaks reached by unemploy-

ment rates during the 1990s, has an average of 7.5%, which is slightly less than the national rates (8.7% in 2002).

A significant decrease can be perceived in the number of adolescents and young adults living in Turin. The population over 65 years currently amounts to 20% over the total, while young people aged between 15 and 24 were around 74,000 at the end of 2002 (around 8% over the total population). In Barcelona almost 12% of the population is aged between 15 and 24 years. However, the role played by Barcelona as major night-life and entertainment place continuously attracts thousands of young people, including many tourists, who frequent the numerous bars, cafes, discos located in the city and in the nice villages and towns on the Catalan coast. Amsterdam, on the other side, is the one with a stronger presence of young adults: 28% of its population is aged between 20 and 34 years (over 200,000 people). Moreover, the Dutch city annually gathers huge amounts of young tourists who, besides taking part in the trendy nightlife and entertainment industry, are fascinated by its international reputation as “sin city” and its liberal attitude towards drugs and prostitution.

From a socio-cultural perspective, all three cities have experienced significant changes during the past few decades. From predominantly “white” until the 1960s, Amsterdam’s population developed into a multicultural one. Today only slightly more than half of the population (53%) is ethnic Dutch (themselves and both parents born in the Netherlands), while people from other Western European countries (about 10%), the former colony Surinam (10%), and the Caribbean overseas territories (2%), as well as from Morocco (8%) and Turkey (5%), compose the largest foreign groups. Although both Barcelona and Turin have experienced significant demographic changes – with respectively 7.6% and 4% of the population being composed of foreigners -, it seems that migrants often face difficulties to get integrated into the urban social and economic life. The number of second and third-generation migrants living in Amsterdam is substantially higher than in Barcelona and Turin.

Drug markets: the decline of the open drug scene

In all three cities cannabis is the most widespread illicit drug. In Turin this is largely an underground market in private settings and around public places such as pubs and clubs, although some dealers – mostly foreign migrants - still operate in the open drug scene. In Barcelona, both hashish and marijuana are usually sold in the street, particularly in those areas close to clubs, pubs and other meeting places. In Amsterdam cannabis is predominantly sold in “coffee shops” and there is hardly any street market. In May 1999 the city had a total of 294 coffee shops and more than half of them were located in the inner city (180). Moreover, both in Amsterdam and Barcelona there are several “smart shops” – where all kinds of drug paraphernalia (hash-pipes, pill-testing kits etc. which are also sold in so-called “head shops”) are sold as well as “smart drugs”, “non traditional” psychotropics,

such as magic mushrooms, along with other legal drugs, including herbal or natural ecstasy products (which do not contain MDMA). Products related to cannabis, like seeds, resources for self-cultivation (earth, high-powered lamps, etc.) or clothes made from hemp are sold in the so-called “Grow Shops”.

Heroin is predominantly associated with the street market. Both in Amsterdam and Barcelona, it is usually sold in the streets or apartments of lower class neighbourhoods with high unemployment rates (such as the *Zeedijk* and *Bijlmermeer* areas in Amsterdam and the city centre and the periphery in Barcelona). As a consequence of the harsh police repression against the open drug scene during the 1990s, street markets have significantly re-shaped in Turin. Traditional retail points in proximity of squares, parks or meeting places hardly resist. The urban geography of dealing places tends to change very quickly and suddenly adapts to external circumstances.

In Turin, heroin is mostly sold by foreign dealers - mainly newcomers - who occupy the riskiest sector of the market – the street - and are highly exposed to seizures and arrest. Italian dealers prefer to supply their old circles of well-known consumers, although the emergence of some “recreational” use of heroin, which is increasingly smoked or sniffed, has enhanced the spreading of retail points close to clubs, pubs and discos. The two markets, however, are largely separated. In Amsterdam, as well, most of the dealers at street level belong to specific ethnic minorities (particularly Surinamese, Antilleans and Moroccans), while native “white” dealers dominate the recreational retail market.

In Amsterdam, in particular, the heroin street market is strongly mixed with crack cocaine which is taking over heroin more and more. Both in Barcelona and Turin no information was gathered on the availability of crack cocaine in the local markets, although data collected suggest that it has not become very popular yet. This might reflect a more advanced stage in Amsterdam’s drugs market development.

As far as the availability of cocaine powder is concerned, the outcomes of the research pointed out that in all three cities it tends to be commercialised away from the street market for heroin and, in the case of Amsterdam, crack cocaine. Usually, it is purchased within networks of friends or acquaintances, often at private addresses, or through the use of mobile phones which have increased the popularity of home-delivery services (especially among the traditional network of elite and “recreational” users). For Amsterdam and Barcelona, however, the increase in the use of cocaine powder among young people is most clear, both from quantitative and qualitative studies.

The emergence of a new drug marketplace

Both in Barcelona and Amsterdam ecstasy consumption started to take off during the first half and mid-1980s while in Turin it spread some years later, between the

end of the 1980s and the summer of 1991. Ecstasy arrived in Barcelona immediately after having boomed in Ibiza – one of the major pole of the dance and techno-music culture during the 1980s -, while in Amsterdam its diffusion was promoted by alternative circles and trend-setting globetrotters who had their first experiences in Goa or Ibiza and the consequent “Summer of love” in the United Kingdom. In this respect, both Barcelona and Amsterdam appear to have been among the early starters, while Turin, can be defined as a trend follower.

During the second half of the 1980s, ecstasy consumption became increasingly popular – both in Amsterdam and in Barcelona - while the market started to expand accordingly. In Amsterdam, the first large scale house parties – which are allegedly associated with ecstasy use - were organised during the late summer of 1988. The first generation of ecstasy-dealers – mainly composed of users and/or people who used to sell to friends and acquaintances – gradually grew and organised themselves, while some of them started to make contacts with the traditional amphetamine cookers in the south of the country. During those years, Amsterdam became one of the main ecstasy distribution and international trafficking centres in Europe. On the other side, from the beginning of the 1990s onward, the first news concerning ecstasy home production appeared in the Spanish press, while the activities of some international trafficking networks operating in the country were dismantled by the police.

In all three cities analysed, ecstasy became relatively widely available in the local market during the early 1990s.

However, from the very beginning, this new drug market seemed to differ a lot from the traditional ones. Firstly because it was more “hidden” and well entrenched into wider social and cultural environments. The embeddedness of drugs use in peculiar settings, life styles and social contexts has deeply influenced the ways in which these substances are commercialised and made available to final users.

The strong links existing between synthetic drugs consumption, dance and techno-music nightlife settings – increasingly frequented by growing numbers of mainstream young people – enhanced the emergence of a new social type of drug consumers. “Recreational” drug users are mainly found among the young, employed and studious who participated in the dance-scene culture, and not among the marginalized and socially deprived.

On the other side, the dynamics which allow the exchange money-drug to take place have changed accordingly. Ecstasy, amphetamines, and other “dance drugs” for the recreational market can be predominantly found at private addresses among relatives, friends and acquaintances. Here, both the dealer and the user operate in a safer environment, transaction costs are lower as well as the stress associated with the open drug scene. In Turin, for example, it clearly emerges that suppliers are often people who join together on the basis of extra-economic social ties (i.e. friendship, neighbourhood, belonging to the same cultural and social con-

texts). They belong to all social, economic and cultural strata and their involvement into the drug business is often occasional or discontinued and cannot be interpreted with reference to their supposed social exclusion (as it happened, particularly in the past, for other drug markets). Most of them are ecstasy users themselves.

Ecstasy has not become a typical “street drug”, neither in terms of supply structure, nor in terms of status. Ecstasy street dealing does not almost exist if we except those selling points flourishing in proximity of clubs, discos, pubs, as well as at raves. Even in these semi-open drug scenes trust and a certain knowledge of the various informal “codes” and interaction rules represent important resources for carrying out good businesses. As pointed out in all three reports, because of the increase of entry controls, it has become more difficult to buy pills at discos and clubs. Dealers usually prefer to stop in the parking areas close to these places, while several consumers try to get “sorted” before going to dance.

Growing evidences on the spreading of the so-called “delivery” or “order by phone” system have been collected in all the three cities during the field work. This system usually foresees the delivery of the pills directly at home or in a agreed meeting place. The customer should only have a contact, i.e. a name and a telephone number, make a phone call and explain his/her request, sometime using a sort of metaphorical language and passwords. Although the retail market predominantly remains a “disorganised” and highly “informal” market, inhabited by a myriad of individuals, small groups and loosely organized networks, the diffusion of more structured selling modalities might be interpreted as a signal of increasing professionalisation of the business.

During the late 1990s the ecstasy markets of both Amsterdam and Barcelona reached the stage of stabilisation and saturation. In Amsterdam, both qualitative and quantitative research indicate an increase in powder cocaine consumption among trend setting clubbers and ravers, although ecstasy is still popular. In Barcelona, the decline of ecstasy consumption has been accompanied by an increase in cannabis and cocaine use. Although ecstasy is still very much linked with specific night-life settings – such as those where the so-called *musica machina* is particularly appreciated -, a decline in the quality of pills available in the local market has been reported by several users. In Turin, on the other side, data available suggest that ecstasy consumption is still popular, although the growing use of smoked and sniffed heroin and cocaine among young consumers represents an emerging trend which might deserve more attention.

Although the use of ecstasy is rather common among groups of clubbers and ravers, data from surveys among the general population – as far as available – make very clear that the vast majority of young people have never tried ecstasy, while in all three cities combined use of both licit (i.e. alcohol, mixed drinks, cocktails) and illicit substances and various kinds of illicit drugs (the so-called poly-drug consumption) has been increasingly reported.

In Amsterdam, in particular, the ecstasy market has recently become more “reliable” (pills contain an average of 90mg of MDMA), while the retail price has dropped very significantly (one pill currently costs from around 4–5 € to 2.5 €). Ecstasy sold in Barcelona’s street market costs around 6-7 € per pill and have an average purity between 70 and 90 mg of MDMA per tablet, while in Turin ecstasy is still relatively expensive (between 7 € and 15 € per pill). Both in Amsterdam and Turin, information gathered during the field work indicates that pills bought at parties or in clubs are generally more expensive than at private addresses.

The supply: loosely organised networks and “informal” drug market

In terms of production and trafficking patterns, Amsterdam certainly plays a more important role than the two other cities – even if the Netherlands might not play the very dominant role that is often suggested. Independent scientific research on the phenomenon as well as comparable data are lacking, while statistics often rely on fragmentary information based on specific law enforcement operations. Moreover, what is going on elsewhere, such as in the booming market and potential production areas emerged in South-East Asia and Eastern Europe, is largely ignored. However, the closeness of Amsterdam to production facilities as well as the presence of a set of favourable circumstances, such as the availability of a large industrial sector, have significantly influenced the development of the local ecstasy market.

As far as ecstasy production is concerned, data gathered on Amsterdam’s market suggest that the groups involved are mostly composed of few people, have a network structure and rely on the services provided by outsiders, such as professional chemists or technicians that can set up and run small labs, people involved in the trade of legal or illegal precursors, and people who can provide a location to set up the lab. While in the Netherlands ecstasy production has gone through a growing professionalisation and scaling up, in Spain it seems that it is still at the so-called *amateur* stage, i.e. kitchen-labs for the manufacture of relatively small amounts of pills mostly earmarked for local consumption.

Although Amsterdam’s role in the international ecstasy market has been recognised by most of the sources consulted, it should be noticed that this is only partly due to the activities carried out by Dutch criminal organisations. Ecstasy trafficking attracts people from various nationalities and ethnic backgrounds, and inter-ethnic transactions – as well as poly-drug activities - are becoming increasingly popular. As emphasised in the report, Amsterdam is a very good place to buy and sell ecstasy, not only because the city attracts many foreign customers but also because they can go rather unnoticed with their activities. Similarly, the field work carried out in Turin and Barcelona confirmed that several local dealers usually prefer to go to Amsterdam (but also to other Dutch cities) to buy large or small quantities of pills, because it is rather easy to find contacts and links for setting up trafficking lines, without being disturbed by border controls in the European Union.

The three drug markets analysed are mostly populated by agile, loosely structured, open and highly adaptable networks which successfully manage the entire process: from synthetic drugs importation and/or wholesale level distribution to further commercialisation and final sale to end-users. No indication was collected on the presence of criminal groups able to dominate, from a monopolistic position, the market. Even in Turin, where Italian traditional mafia-type organisations exercise a certain level of territorial control and are involved in numerous legal and illegal markets, well-structured, hierarchical, pyramidal criminal groups seem to be not interested in the business. A multitude of individuals, often in formations of crews or groups, have been shown to enter and exit the scene with great ease, thus leading the three research teams to talk about a sort of “free” drug economy and an “informal” drug market.

From the description of the market outlined before comes the idea of a sort of “disorganised” drug scene, inhabited by a myriad of individuals, small groups and loosely organized networks who often cooperate and establish partnerships among themselves. In this sense, if we had to reformulate the title of the project, we should delete the part referring to the role of organised crime groups (as they are traditionally pinpointed), since no strong evidence on the involvement of pyramid-type, hierarchical criminal groups into ecstasy dealing was gathered.

Although the three cities show a different stage of development of the ecstasy market, all of them seem to have gone through a similar process. At the beginning, pills were mostly supplied by friends and acquaintances with the same social and cultural background who shared with their clients the experience. Nowadays, this “idealist” type of dealer seems to have been surpassed by more business-oriented distributors who have previous experience in other drug markets and are there just for money. This trend is particularly evident in Amsterdam, while Barcelona and Turin are still experiencing a sort of “transition” phase with a relatively parallel presence of both types of dealers.

One of the major competitive advantage of these people is that they tend to establish close contacts with mainstream youth in the circuit of parties, discos and raves, where pills consumption largely takes place. Hence, most of ecstasy dealers described in the three reports are not foreigners – such as in the case of other drug markets. In Turin, for example, as well as in Barcelona, the ecstasy retail market is almost totally run by local people, since foreign migrants – heavily involved into cannabis and heroin markets - are perceived as “outsiders”. Foreign people are still considered as “aliens” not only in many legal sectors of the economy, but also in several illegal ones. In the case of Turin, it seems that foreigners do not possess the right amount of “social capital” necessary for successfully undertaking the business. Even in Amsterdam, for instance, ecstasy dealers are “whiter” than those who deal with cocaine.

Law enforcement and policy

Significant differences emerged among drugs policies and law enforcement strategies implemented into the three contexts analysed.

While Dutch drug policy is based on harm reduction and a public health approach, both the Italian and Spanish legislation tend *de facto* to criminalise synthetic drugs consumption through administrative sanctions and/or fines. However, both in the Netherlands and Spain more or less structured systems which allow to monitor the quality of the pills available in the local market are currently in place. Institutional pill-testing programmes, for example, were established in the Netherlands at the beginning of the 1990s, while in Spain this service is mainly provided by NGOs working in nightlife settings. These systems allow to monitor and, at the same time, regulate the illicit market, since consumers can control the quality of the pills and avoid harmful substances. Although the new Dutch government has recently announced that it would not allow pill testing at public events anymore, it should be mentioned that as far as Italy is concerned the issue of pill-testing has not even been seriously addressed in any public forum so far. Most consumers have to buy pill-test kits abroad, since pill testing is forbidden.

Both in Netherlands and in Spain ad hoc law enforcement units expressly targeting synthetic drugs investigations have been created, while in Italy there is no specialised agency dealing with this type of operations. Hence, communication within the police system often does not work, while information exchange is sometime limited and incomplete.

The focus of Dutch drug law enforcement mostly remains on large scale organised trafficking, while both in Barcelona and Turin the main target is represented by middle and low level trafficking organisations. Obviously, the amount of resources allocated to particular operations often depends on the input received politically. Particularly after some tragic events, such as the death of young people who had allegedly used ecstasy or other synthetic drugs, law enforcement action is usually stronger even against the retail market itself.

The role of mass media in raising the alarm toward the ecstasy phenomenon has been emphasised in all the three cities, as well as the consequent waves of repression activities driven by increased levels of social concern.

The different position occupied by the three cities in the geopolitics of ecstasy trafficking and distribution clearly influences the way in which law enforcement's priorities are identified and pursued. The major role played by the United States and other European partners in attaching to the Netherlands the "label" of major ecstasy producer has been often recalled by the Dutch research group. Ironically, the paradox of successful law enforcement would be that it triggers stigmatisation: the more it is seized in Netherlands, the more the country appears to be the source of the problem.

At city level, most of drug enforcement action focuses on maintaining public order and preventing nuisance related to drug use and dealing. Police action within clubs, discos and raves – although not uncommon - is usually avoided because of the tensions that it can cause with the people who manage the entertainment industry. Meetings and agreements between the police and discos' owners are usually preferred, as emphasised in the reports concerning both Amsterdam and Turin. However, cooperation between public institutions and disco's staff often depends on various local circumstances and discos entrepreneurs prefer to rely on the surveillance carried out by doorkeepers, private security guards and internal staff.

Some final recommendations

Beside the relevant contribution that, in our view, the project has given to the knowledge of a still under-investigated drug market, the research carried out in this field has led to the identification of a number of recommendations which can contribute to develop more informed policies in the field of synthetic drugs.

Firstly, the three research teams strongly emphasise the need to widen the level of knowledge concerning synthetic drugs markets both at national and at international levels. Synthetic drug related research is still underdeveloped in several European countries, while cross-country comparative studies are very few. The allocation of more resources aimed at promoting and supporting the implementation of studies in this field is highly recommended.

Secondly, as far as law enforcement activities are concerned, the project singled out – particularly in Barcelona and Turin – the prevalence of police activities targeting the retail level of the market, the one which is mostly exposed to risks of interception. The *de facto* criminalisation of synthetic drugs consumers should be avoided, as well as those activities which can contribute to throw consumers into criminal circuits. These strategies, according to the outcomes of the research, push the market in "close settings" instead of reducing it.

The study has shown that attempts to combat synthetic drugs by means of law enforcement have often proved unsuccessful and that it is difficult to argue for the status quo. Ecstasy use – according to most of the people and privileged observers interviewed - is "unproblematic" for users and society at large, when good information and a set of harm reduction guidelines are available. Most incidents related to ecstasy use are often the consequence of the conditions in which consumption takes place, rather than of the substance itself.

Moreover, while possession of ecstasy for use is considered a criminal offence, most users do not think they commit a crime. The scheduling of ecstasy on the lists of dangerous drugs in national law and international conventions should be carefully reconsidered on the basis of scientific research on the harms of the substance.

Finally, the promotion of more adequate policies aimed at reducing the risks related to ecstasy consumption, through the dissemination of information and the availability of pill-testing facilities close to night-life settings and places, is highly recommended. As well as improving the conditions during events where ecstasy is used, through a set of guidelines on the availability of First Aid, “chill out” facilities, a sufficient water supply, good ventilation, etc. In this regard, it is advisable that awareness raising and prevention campaigns are based on the outcomes of sound scientific research on the dynamics of drug markets’ development rather than on recurrent waves of social alarm and exaggerated concerns driven by misinformed press and mass media.