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Drug Policies

Building Pathways Towards More Inclusive and Effective Drug Policies:

A Guide for the
Elaboration of National
Research Agendas



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Building pathways towards more inclusive and effective drug policies: A guide for the elaboration of national research agendas

CREDITS

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Result 1: Strengthening of the National Drug Observatories

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Introduction

Drug policies that prioritise repression and sanctions are being reviewed more rigorously. In April 2016, the UN held a Special Session of the General Assembly on the world drug problem, in which member states approved a final document calling for a change in approach, with a greater emphasis on public health, development, and human rights. Likewise, emphasis was placed on the need to promote research and generate evidence to understand the various factors related to the production, trafficking and consumption of drugs, using indicators consistent with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). To achieve these goals by 2030, research will be essential, since it will provide knowledge and reliable data for effective and innovative responses.

Within the framework of the SDGs, those responsible for decision-making and the implementation of public policies must consider how their actions and objectives relate to drug policies. The National Drug Observatories (NDO) are crucial in this process, since they collect and analyse information in a continuous, systematic and integrated manner, for the purpose of improving the quality of the state response in terms of drug policy. In addition, NDOs must manage the knowledge they produce, making it accessible to national and sub-national institutions, public opinion, and civil society organisations.

Since 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has presented new challenges and scenarios for NDOs. The virus has had a negative impact on drug consumption and the drug market, generating an economic and public health crisis that affects vulnerable countries and groups. Poverty and inequality are factors that contribute to drug-related activity, such as illicit cultivation, micro-trafficking and problematic use. Therefore, it is necessary to link drug policies with the SDGs to reduce inequality gaps in this adverse context.

The importance of research in drug policies has been highlighted in the 2021-2025 Hemispheric Plan of Action on Drugs of the Inter-American Drug Abuse Control Commission (CICAD), which promotes the strengthening of NDOs to promote research and the collection of information that can serve as a basis for evidence-based policy making. Priority actions have been established such as the strengthening and establishment of national drug information networks, the creation of early warning systems, and the publication of periodic reports on the supply and demand of drugs.



NDOs play a key role in adapting drug policies to the post-pandemic context and in reforming punitive policies. Furthermore, they are essential for generating consistent data streams and reliable statistics. To achieve these objectives, it is essential to improve the standards of data collection, analysis and reporting. However, it is crucial to recognise that the indicators managed by these NDOs do not fully capture the complexity of the problem and the necessary responses. Before the pandemic, there was a marked disparity in the development of NDOs in Latin America and the Caribbean, and only a limited number of countries had the capabilities required to produce knowledge on a regular and sustained basis (COPOLAD, 2017).

Despite the fact that the NDOs operate within the framework of a drug strategy or policy, they face several obstacles that restrict their access to information generated by other institutions. These challenges can be political, bureaucratic or financial. However, the NDOs produce and analyse information on the reduction of demand for drugs and the control of the supply. Most work in coordination with other actors and use updated records to incorporate information from various sources. Some countries even have early warning systems at different levels of development, which allow them to detect new potentially dangerous psychoactive substances and new consumption patterns in a timely manner, thus preventing public health problems. Although the indicators most used by the NDOs focus on drug use in various populations, it is essential to direct efforts towards the generation of evidence on the control of drug supply and alternative development, beyond the metrics that are reported periodically.

The role of NDOs in drug policy becomes more relevant when examining the World Drug Report 2022, published by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). The report highlights the fact that the legalisation of cannabis has increased daily use and health-related impacts, especially among young people. It also points to increases in cocaine production and the spread of synthetic drugs, as well as gaps in access to treatment, particularly for women. The report also reveals the environmental impacts associated with the cultivation and production of illegal drugs. Therefore, it is necessary to implement policies and interventions that protect people and communities, strengthen the prevention and treatment of drug use, and address the illicit drug market (UNODC, 2022).

At the global level, it is essential to establish drug research priorities that involve all stakeholders. The setting of priorities involves identifying and agreeing on the areas or issues that are most important to stakeholders, ensuring that research and funding decisions address critical evidence gaps, enhance accountability, and increase the relevance and legitimacy of research. Ultimately, this leads to better drug policy outcomes.

Setting research priorities is essential to improving drug policy. Through effective coordination and avoiding duplication of efforts, we can optimise resources and ensure that studies are relevant and effective. However, gaps often exist between research and policy, attributable to weaknesses in communication and the lack of connection between disciplines in drug policy. By determining research priorities, it is possible to bridge these



gaps and ensure that scientific findings are used effectively to inform and improve drug policy. Well-coordinated research focused on priority areas contributes significantly to stronger and more efficient drug policies, by allowing the integration of relevant scientific results into decision-making processes.

Developing a national drug research agenda presents several challenges, such as the need to use diverse methods to prioritise research, taking into account the context, population, setting, and available resources. The priority-setting process can be complex, making it difficult to identify and integrate the perspectives and values of the various stakeholders. Although there is no consensus on what constitutes a “successful” research priority-setting process, it needs to be fair, legitimate, evidence-based, and involve a broad spectrum of stakeholders in a transparent manner. Therefore, it is essential to develop a national drug research agenda that actively involves all stakeholders, ensuring that research efforts are aligned with needs and expectations.

There are at least four main audiences when setting research priorities. The first audience includes the **decision makers and professionals** from public, private and non-profit organisations, who will benefit from the development of a research agenda that meets their information needs. The second audience is composed of **financiers**, who may find it useful to support studies identified as being relevant. The third audience is made up of **researchers**, who can more effectively apply the knowledge they generate and synthesise to respond to problems considered important by policy-level decision makers. Finally, the fourth audience consists of the **citizens and communities** affected by the issues being investigated. It is important that research results are communicated in a clear and accessible manner to these audiences so that they can understand and use them to make informed decisions and improve their quality of life. Furthermore, involving the community in research can be an effective way of ensuring that research questions are relevant and that findings are effectively applied in practice.

The gap between the evidence generated (or not) by research and the information needed by policymakers highlights the importance of closer integration between science and policy processes. For example, government funding for drug research could mandate that funded studies focus on priority areas, such as alternative development, the prevention of adolescent drug use, or the treatment of disorders related to substance use. Fostering a broader dialogue between government and academia is essential to reducing potential isolation between the two parties.

Although researchers are keen to contribute to political decisions with their studies, they may lack adequate knowledge of the immediate demands for information and the medium- and long-term research priorities of those in charge of drug policy. On the other hand, government officials may not be aware of the work carried out by universities and research centres and how this can significantly contribute to improving public administration.



A possible solution to addressing this challenge involves promoting the creation of collaborative spaces between those responsible for public policies and researchers. This would make it possible to identify, through consensus, a set of research priorities that meet the national need for evidence. These partnerships would allow the most pressing concerns and questions to be addressed, ensuring that research is relevant and valuable to drug policy. In this context, it is appropriate to have a national research agenda that defines the priorities in different areas of drug policy. This agenda should also facilitate the inter-institutional coordination process for generating evidence. By setting clear and shared objectives, both policymakers and researchers will be able to work together in an effective and results-oriented manner. This synergy between both parties will not only improve the quality and applicability of the research, but will also strengthen evidence-based decision-making.



1. Purpose and objectives

The purpose of the guide is to provide a useful and practical tool for the design, implementation and evaluation of a research agenda for national drug observatories, based on their national needs for scientific evidence. In addition, the guide seeks to effectively address the challenges of bridging drug knowledge gaps.

The objectives of this guide are to:

-
- Provide a conceptual framework for the development of a national drug research agenda.
-
- Provide practical tools for the identification and selection of relevant research topics and areas.
-
- Identify the key factors that need to be considered when defining the structure and content of a drug research agenda.
-
- Provide an overview of drug research objectives and priorities at national level.
-
- Promote collaboration among national drug observatories, researchers and relevant organisations in the field of drug research.
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- Offer recommendations for the effective implementation of a national drug research agenda.



2. Conceptual framework

2.1. The role of research in drug policy

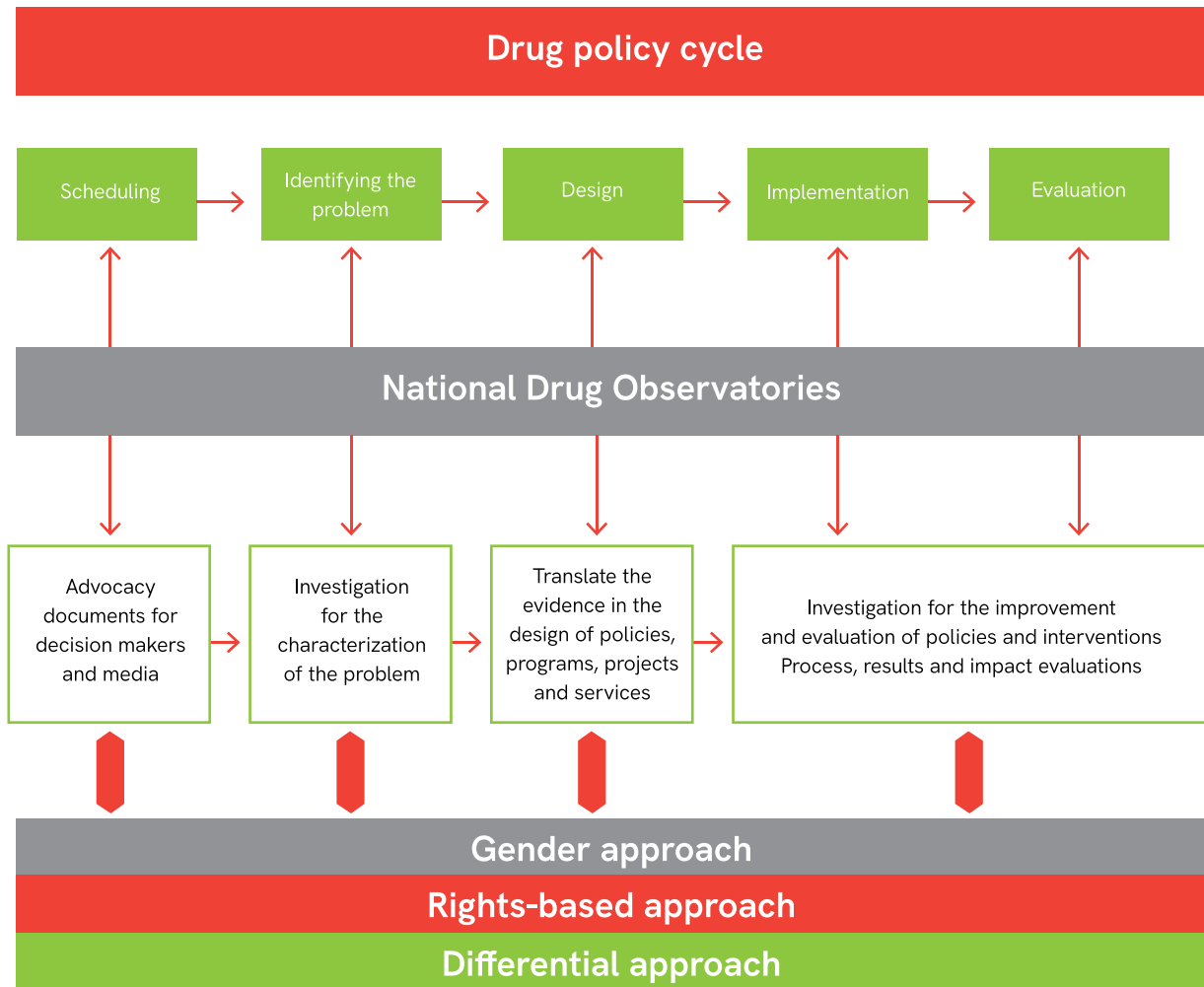
The complexity and multi-factorial nature of the drug issue are acknowledged, as is the need to adopt a stance based on research and evidence. Responding through policies requires an approach involving multiple disciplines, such as criminology, economics, psychology, education, epidemiology, public health, medicine, political science and sociology, among others. In this context, a national research agenda is a tool for government authorities, civil society organisations and academic entities to identify and carry out studies that help improve policies and interventions. The adoption of evidence-based policies and practices, the thematic priorities of which must be established by consensus, will favour decision-making regarding programmes, services and projects. It will also allow the application of knowledge derived from research on the design, implementation and evaluation of policies, promoting a more rational, rigorous and systematic approach.

Research is essential for the formulation of effective drug policies, including alternative development and controlling the supply of drugs. Research provides objective, data-driven information, enabling policymakers to make informed decisions on how to address the problem of drug use and illicit supply. In addition, it helps to identify the underlying factors that influence drug use, associated problems, and the production of illicit crops, which makes it possible to develop more effective policies and programmes to prevent and treat addiction, as well as promoting alternative development initiatives. Research is also essential for assessing the effectiveness of existing policies and programmes. This allows for continuous adjustments and improvements in order to maximise their impact. Lastly, research makes it possible to develop a deeper understanding of the causes and consequences of drug use, as well as the factors that influence illicit supply and production. This helps foster a focus on public health, human rights, and sustainable development rather than focusing solely on penal aspects.

The proposal for a national drug research agenda is based on an action framework that integrates the policy cycle, together with a series of research and knowledge products that contribute to each stage, from scheduling¹ to evaluation (see Figure 1). In turn, the need to have metrics and analysis that help address the drug problem, improve the description of the problem and evaluate the inter-institutional response is understood. It is recognised that each country in Latin America and the Caribbean has specific data needs. In order to improve drug policy, we require not only more data but also higher quality, policy-relevant knowledge and interventions.



Figure 1. Links between the drug policy cycle and research results



1. Scheduling is a stage in which the most important problems and issues that must be addressed by the government are identified and selected. It is the first stage of the public policy cycle, in which a list of issues and problems that decision-makers consider should be addressed is established. Once the issues are on the government agenda, the next stages of the public policy cycle can take place, such as policy formulation, implementation, and evaluation. Scheduling is essential to ensure that limited resources are used effectively.



2.1.1. Scheduling

The generation of evidence has an important role to play in the identification and prioritisation of problems and challenges in the field of drug policy. This evidence can influence the drug policy scheduling process, as the resulting research and findings can provide valuable information to decision-makers about the importance and urgency of certain issues. For example, research can reveal whether or not current policies are effective in reducing drug use, as well as the quality or impact of prevention and treatment. The resulting evidence can also be used by the media and political and social actors to evaluate and debate the effectiveness of drug policies, and in turn, influence the public and political agenda. These debates may lead to a reconsideration of punitive or ineffective approaches and an increased budget allocation based on evidence.

2.1.2. Identifying the problem

Research can provide valuable information for identifying and addressing public problems by providing accurate data on their magnitude and severity. This enables informed and well-founded decision-making. (National Research Council, 2012). In the field of drug policies, evidence contributes to the recognition of problems by offering data and research on the impact of prevention, treatment, control and development policies. Although some argue that drug policies would improve if politicians paid more attention to scientific evidence (Stevens & Ritter, 2013), policies that are not based on scientific research still persist, despite the existence of a solid basis of studies and numerous academics working in the field of drugs and drug policy.

Although evidence is essential for drug policy in identifying the causes and magnitudes of drug use, it is important to recognise that there are other factors that must also be considered. These factors include the political context, ideology, values, public opinion, and budget constraints (Ritter, 2009). Drug policy is complex and requires an integrated approach that not only takes into account scientific evidence, but also other relevant factors, such as equity, social justice and human rights.

2.1.3. Design

Information plays an important role in the design of public policies, providing solid information that makes it easier for decision-makers to design more effective policies. In the public sector, evidence is of particular importance since it makes it possible to understand the extent to which policies fulfil their purpose and provides relevant information to make informed decisions. In addition, the use of data and impact analyses in the design of public policies can increase the efficiency and quality of the resources assigned to these policies.

However, the availability of information in the development of public policies depends to a large extent on political leadership and the consolidation of evidence-based policies in the country's institutional framework. It is essential for those who make decisions regarding public policies to have empirical evidence and indicators to adopt measures



that effectively improve citizens' well-being. For example, through research, interventions can be identified that reduce drug availability, decrease violence in drug markets, prevent the initiation of use, and mitigate problematic drug use (Strang et al., 2012).

The design of evidence-based public policies entails a systematic approach that seeks to provide significant results for citizens, linking government management with the needs of the population. In this process, the analysis of budgetary and socio-economic feasibility is essential to a determining the availability of resources and evaluating the costs and benefits of the proposed public policies.

2.1.4. Implementation

Providing quality data allows those responsible to manage the implementation of policies appropriately. For this, it is necessary to have an adequate structure and organisation that allow effective implementation. In this regard, research can provide valuable knowledge about implementation structures, including human resources, the institutionalisation of programmes and services, financing, and regulations, among others, to develop recommendations and guidelines.

To maximise the role of research in the implementation of drug policies, it is pertinent to overcome the barriers that prevent the adoption of evidence-based interventions². In that context, implementation science³ can offer a relevant framework to facilitate the integration of evidence-based practices and policies into existing services and programmes, with the aim of improving their impact. In the field of drug policy, implementation science can help identify and address gaps between scientific evidence and practice in terms of policies and programmes (Louie et al., 2021).

Research can also contribute to the implementation of drug policies by identifying possible problematic aspects in the execution of interventions. For example, through implementation fidelity analysis⁴ (Carroll et al., 2007). Also, the actual execution of the policies can generate new data that can be used to improve the impact and implementation processes in the future. Along those lines, rigorous and ongoing research can also improve the quality of government data. Therefore, it is important to make the most of the information from monitoring systems in order to achieve successful drug policy implementation.

2. Interventions, programmes or practices that have been proven effective through research.

3. Implementation science is defined as scientific research applied to the effective, sustained, and integrated adoption of evidence-based practices, interventions, and policies in clinical practice, health systems, and communities. In addition, it seeks to study and develop methods and strategies that facilitate the integration and regular use of evidence-based practice by practitioners and policy makers.

4. Implementation fidelity refers to the degree to which an intervention or programme is carried out as planned.



2.1.5. Assessment

In addition to conventional metrics, drug policy evaluation can be improved through research, which provides relevant information to understand the impact of strategies and interventions on national drug policy indicators. In this regard, the evaluation of policies is not limited to monitoring management indicators but also implies understanding the social, political, cultural and economic context in which they are implemented. For example, some drug policies focus on indicators such as the prevalence of drug use, arrests, seizures, imprisonment, and eradication efforts, which may offer an incomplete picture of the results obtained and hide knowledge gaps that need to be explored. A limited set of indicators may provide little information on how drug policies affect the health, safety, development and human rights of communities.

To improve the evaluation of drug policies, it is necessary to move beyond the structure that focuses exclusively on the reduction of drug demand and supply. Instead, other dimensions of action should be incorporated that include indicators related to access to services and programmes for vulnerable populations, as well as human rights and development. In this way, the impacts of drug policy on communities and individuals could be more fully measured. Furthermore, research can be a key factor directly contributing to these efforts.

As mentioned previously, a viable alternative is to use indicators based on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to evaluate drug policies. This is justified due to the growing understanding of the intersections between the SDGs and drug policy. The lack of data is a critical limitation that makes it difficult to improve the responsiveness of drug policy evaluation, and indicators based on the SDGs could provide a suitable alternative. With this, there is an opportunity to integrate drug policies into broader efforts to achieve policies and interventions that are based on human rights, peace, security and sustainable development.

The challenge of improving drug policy evaluation requires the critical limitation of the lack of capacity to collect accurate and sufficient data to be addressed. Even if governments intend to expand the number of relevant metrics and indicators to assess the effectiveness of their policies, the lack of data collection infrastructure can significantly hamper reform in this area. To address this situation, it is necessary to consider a multidimensional analysis framework that makes it possible to identify the advances and challenges to improve our knowledge on the subject of drugs. By doing so, we can improve assessment capacity and encourage evidence-based and informed decision-making.



2.2. Multidimensional analysis for the identification of research priorities

For the identification of research priorities, it is useful to consider a reference framework that allows the issue of drugs⁵ to be addressed from different dimensions of analysis. On the other hand, it is important to consider the “location” dimension, which makes it possible to understand the specific dynamics of each region or community. Knowing the places where the problem is most frequent makes it possible to identify the local factors that can influence the occurrence of the problem and how these differ from one region or location to another. This, in turn, can be useful for developing more effective interventions tailored to the specific needs of each place.

Another relevant dimension of analysis is that of “causes or mechanisms”, which seeks to analyse the causes and factors that contribute to the problem. These can be of various kinds, such as biological, psychological, social, political or cultural, and their analysis is essential to designing more effective strategies and programmes.

On the other hand, the “evaluation” dimension is relevant to determining which policies, strategies and interventions are most (and least) effective. This analysis should include the effectiveness, efficiency and impact of the interventions, as well as the identification of factors that may limit their impact.

Finally, the “innovation and good practices” dimension seeks to identify best practices and new strategies that can be adopted and institutionalised in drug policy. In this regard, it is important to promote research and innovation in the search for more effective solutions adapted to specific contexts. It is also important to assess existing interventions to identify good practices and promote their replication in different contexts.

Table 1 offers some ideas for applying multidimensional analysis when identifying research priorities. Each dimension can be examined through a series of basic questions.

5. This multidimensional analysis can be applied to any axis or component of the national drug policy.



Table 1. *Multidimensional analysis*

Dimensions of analysis	Some basic research questions
Magnitudes	How many people and communities are affected by drug use? What is the magnitude and what are the impacts associated with drug use?
Location	Where are individuals and communities most affected?
Causes/Mechanisms	What are the causes that explain the problem? What factors are involved? What is the sequence of events and processes explaining the appearance and persistence of the problem?
Evaluation of interventions	How efficient and effective are the policies and interventions and what is their impact? Which interventions reduce the problem?
Innovation and good practices	What is the process for knowledge transfer in the design and implementation of new strategies and/or programmes? What are the best practices?

2.3. The importance of incorporating diverse approaches in the identification of drug research priorities

Drug research is a priority task that requires interdisciplinary collaboration and diverse approaches to identify the most relevant research areas. For this reason, it is pertinent to use a variety of perspectives to identify drug research priorities. Since the drug issue is complex and multifaceted, it cannot be adequately understood from just one perspective. Instead, it is important to adopt specific approaches that allow for a comprehensive and complete analysis of the problem, taking into account the different dimensions that influence it. For this reason, gender, human rights, differential and intersectional approaches are relevant for the identification of research priorities.



2.3.1. Gender approach

Historically, research on drugs in its many expressions has focused on male populations or adopted a gender-neutral approach, resulting in significant knowledge gaps. However, in recent years, it has been recognised that there are significant gender differences in substance use processes, trajectories, and related damage. For example, women use and react to substances differently from men, and often experience even stronger stigma (Chen & Jacobson, 2012; Meyers et al., 2021). They also show differences in terms of prevention and treatment results (Fernández-Montalvo et al., 2017; Vigna-Taglianti et al., 2009; Weichold et al., 2010).

The gender approach is key to understanding how the drug problem affects men and women differently. It is significant to investigate gender inequalities in the use, access and treatment of drugs, as well as their relationship with violence and discrimination. Research should also consider gender in all aspects of service design and assess approaches that respond to their specific needs.

2.3.2. Human rights approach

The adoption of a human rights approach for identifying priorities in drug research is substantive for addressing the penal approach to drug users, analysing alternatives to a punitive approach, and considering alternative intervention approaches that are more oriented towards public health. In addition, this approach would make it possible to promote studies on the effects of policies on the human rights of people who use drugs, as well as on the most vulnerable and marginalised people in society. By identifying these research priorities, issues can be raised that promote equality and social justice and that explore exclusion, branding users as criminals and discrimination as priority topics for study (Bone, 2020; Jürgens et al., 2010; Lines et al., 2017).

It is important for drug policies to be based on values and principles that promote social welfare and justice. The branding of drug users as criminals is not only counter-productive for public health, but also has serious consequences in terms of human rights, such as prison overcrowding and lack of access to medical services. Therefore, research on drugs should consider the impact of policies and strategies on the human rights of those who consume or are in a situation of vulnerability in the production and trafficking of drugs. In addition, research based on a human rights perspective can evaluate policies and their effect on people's rights, offering recommendations and alternatives.



2.3.3. Differential approach

The adoption of the differential approach can be very useful for identifying research priorities in the field of drugs, focusing on the specific needs of vulnerable or socially marginalised groups. This approach takes into account the existing peculiarities and inequalities based on characteristics such as gender, ethnicity, age, sexual orientation and disability. On a practical level, the differential approach reconciles the work of identification and analysis of the specific demands and needs of each group, which makes it possible to design policies and programmes adapted to their needs. In this way, research under this approach allows us to understand how drug policies affect different groups differently and how to design fairer and more inclusive policies. It also allows policies that are potentially harmful and oppressive for vulnerable groups to be identified and overhauled. (García & Zajicek, 2021).

The stigma and marginalisation associated with addictions may be related to other prejudices, such as racism and sexism, leading to multiple forms of discrimination. In this regard, it has been shown that there is a relationship between the racial bias of health care providers and a lower quality of care and inequality in the treatment of racial minorities. In addition, the stigma associated with drug use has a negative impact on the psychological well-being of people who consume them and decreases their access to medical care, detection and drug treatment services (Kulesza et al., 2013; Kulesza et al., 2016). Therefore, it is important to identify and analyse the specific needs of each group through scientific research, since it provides essential information to design specific programmes and policies and adequately respond to the demands of vulnerable groups. It can also identify barriers and obstacles that prevent these groups from accessing services.

2.4. Defining the national drug research agenda

A national drug research agenda is a **strategic document that defines the priorities and objectives for scientific and technological research in the field of drugs**. This agenda determines the research areas that should have priority and the resources needed to carry them out. In this way, information is generated to improve national and sub-national policies and interventions on the subject of drugs. For the development of a national research agenda, planning and collaboration between various institutions and organisations, including universities, government entities, research centres and civil organisations is essential.

It is important to define research priorities in order to obtain the maximum benefit from investment in research and to achieve more efficient management of public and private funds in strategic areas. By defining these priorities clearly and communicably, collaboration among the various institutions and organisations is promoted and potential collaborators are encouraged to align their research with the priorities established in the agenda. This can improve the quality of research and its impact on drug policy.



Research priorities can be set in various ways, either by **defining broad thematic axes** based on the strategic objectives of the drug policy in each country, such as prevention and treatment, alternative development and the control of supply, or by means of **specific thematic axes**, such as the analysis of drug use characteristics and magnitude, the effects of illegal drug cultivation on the environment, and money laundering. It is also possible to set priorities through **specific research questions**, such as “What are the most effective strategies for increasing the perception of risk in drug use among the adolescent population?”, “What are the specific drug use practices in the context of a damage reduction policy?” and “How are alternative development strategies perceived in the communities in which interventions take place?” and “What are the conditions that explain women’s lesser degree of access to treatment?”. It is important to establish clear research priorities in order to adequately focus efforts and resources and achieve a more effective evaluation of drug policies.

Another approach to defining research priorities is through **specific population groups, settings or types of research**. For example, research priorities can be established for indigenous peoples, women, the elderly, children, LGBTIQ+ communities, sex workers or homeless people, among others. With respect to **settings**, research priorities can be defined for rural areas, schools, neighbourhoods or communities, universities and workplaces. Additionally, research types such as **quantitative, qualitative or mixed** approaches are also relevant for setting research priorities.

Establishing effective criteria for defining priorities is important in a national drug research agenda. Some of these criteria are:

-
- The definition of priorities should be based on an **exhaustive and updated analysis of relevant information**, including any knowledge gaps that may affect decisions.
-
- The process for defining priorities should **involve all stakeholders** who might be affected by or have an interest in research priorities, such as financiers, researchers, policymakers, practitioners, non-governmental organisations, and service user representatives.
-
- It is important to use **transparent criteria** to identify and rank research priorities.
-
- **Flexibility** is necessary in defining priorities, which may imply the identification of new priorities in response to specific events (such as the use of new psychoactive substances or emerging patterns of drug use).



In the process of preparing the agenda, it is advisable to establish a clear and specific time horizon. In this way, long-term goals and objectives can be defined, and realistic priorities and timelines can be set for research. An established time horizon facilitates research planning and coordination in the country, which in turn allows better allocation of resources and efforts in priority areas.

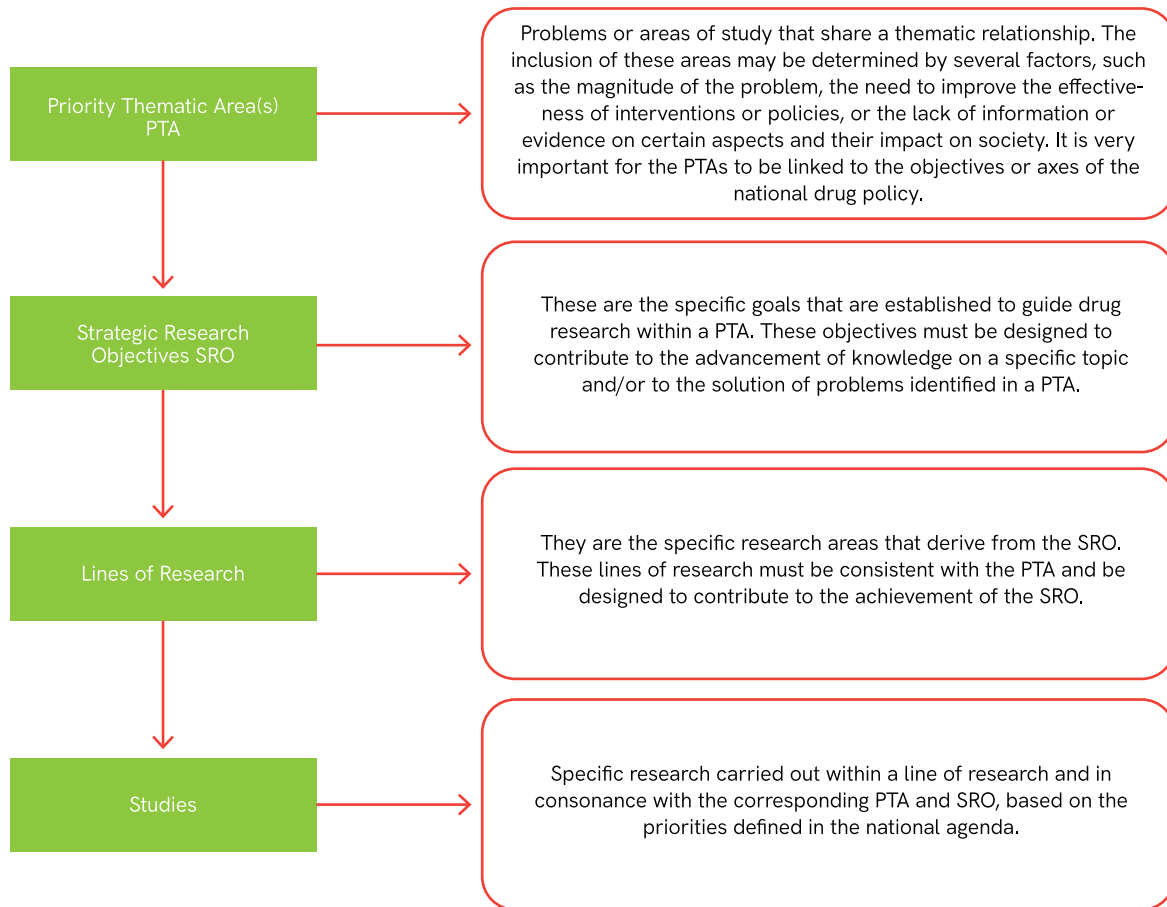
The appropriate time horizon for a national drug research agenda will depend on several factors, such as the scope of the research, the availability of resources, and the political and social context in which it will take place. In general, it is recommended that a national research agenda be between three and five years long, allowing enough time to address a variety of topics and conduct in-depth research while at the same time providing the flexibility to adapt to changes in the political, social and scientific environment.

2.5. Proposed agenda: priority thematic areas, strategic objectives, and lines of research

In order to achieve a strategic and coherent national research agenda, specific components need to be incorporated that allow for a clear and organised structure. These components are key to establishing a shared and consistent vision of research objectives and long-term priorities, as well as providing a structure for the evaluation and monitoring of research progress and results. This approach is essential for making the agenda strategic, since it implies a long-term effort and allows an effective link with national drug policy. The following components are suggested:



Figure 2. Suggested Components of the National Drug Research Agenda





3. Design stages of the national agenda for research on drugs

The design of a national drug research agenda is a process that requires appropriate methodology to ensure its relevance and legitimacy. In this regard, six basic steps have been identified that can serve as a guide for its elaboration. It is important to keep in mind that these stages are not to be interpreted as a fixed or mandatory sequence, but rather as a set of actions that can be adapted to the specific needs of each NDO.

Figure 3. Basic stages for designing the national drug research agenda



3.1. Diagnosis of knowledge gaps and capacities for drug research

The diagnosis of drug research needs is a process that makes it possible to identify and analyse areas of opportunity, knowledge, and gaps related to drug use, abuse, prevention, treatment, control, and public policies. This diagnosis facilitates the determination of any research necessary in order to address these areas, contributing to improved knowledge and practices in this field. By carrying out a diagnosis of research needs on the subject



of drugs, researchers, professionals and public policy makers can recognise the areas that require the highest priority in research. This process generally encompasses the identification of problems and challenges, as well as the analysis of institutional capacities for research. In addition, the data inputs for this process are usually obtained from consultations with experts and interested parties, as well as from the analysis of national and international data.

Apart from this, carrying out a review of the national and international literature in the field of drug-related policies and interventions is relevant in the diagnostic process to assess possible knowledge gaps. A review of the literature can facilitate the identification of current policies and programmes that require evaluation, as well as highlighting emerging issues that need to be addressed and assessed.

In order to develop a national research agenda, it is important to review various types of documents so as to have a complete overview of the problems and challenges that the country faces in terms of drugs. Here are some examples of documents that can be reviewed:

-
- **National strategic planning documents:** These documents provide an overview of the national objectives in the medium and long term. It is also very useful to review the technical documents issued by organisations specialised in national strategic planning. Additionally, it is important to consider reviewing the national strategic development plan or its equivalent (a document that reflects an agreed and shared vision of the future of the country) in order to align the contribution of the national drug research agenda with the plans for national development.
-
- **National statistics:** These statistics provide information on the current status of issues and challenges and can be used to set research priorities. Statistical reports related to health, education, the economy, crime or citizen security, gender gaps and living conditions, among other topics, are particularly useful for contextualising. Ideally, this information should come from the institution in charge of the national statistical system, which is responsible for setting standards, planning, directing, coordinating, and supervising the official statistical activities of each country.
-
- **Documents from international organisations:** Reviewing the documents of relevant international organisations, such as the UN, UNESCO, WHO, among others, can help identify global problems and challenges and research trends. It is important to review relevant international documents, such as the research strategies of other countries, to get an idea of best practices and global trends.



- **Research dossiers or reports:** Documents from international organisations: Reviewing documents from relevant international organisations, such as the UN, UNESCO, WHO, among others, can help identify global issues and challenges and trends in research. It is important to review international documents, such as other countries' research strategies or agendas, to get an idea of global best practices and trends.

Table 3. Databases for obtaining academic information

PUBMED  <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/>

SCIELO  <https://scielo.org/es/>

SCIENCEDIRECT  <https://www.sciencedirect.com/>

LILACS  <https://lilacs.bvsalud.org/es/>

EBSCO  <https://www.ebsco.com/es>

SCOPUS  <https://www.scopus.com/home.uri>

REDALYC  <https://www.redalyc.org/>

PSICODOC  <https://www.psicodoc.org/>

DIALNET  <https://dialnet.unirioja.es/>

PSYCINFO  <https://www.apa.org/pubs/databases/psycinfo>

- **National policies and strategies:** It is important to review existing national policies and strategies to ensure that the National Research Agenda is aligned with national policies and strategies.

3.1.1. From diagnosis to identification of strategic components of the agenda

Based on the diagnosis made, it is possible to identify **strategic research objectives** (SRO), which refer to measures aimed at addressing a gap in knowledge or a need in the field of drug research in each country. These objectives must be aligned with the strategic objectives of the drug policy, seeking to contribute effectively and sustainably to the understanding and solution of problems associated with the subject of drugs. It



is important to highlight that the proper identification and definition of these objectives is a key step in designing the agenda, since they allow a clear and coherent frame of reference to be established that guides efforts and resources towards the areas of greatest importance and relevance in each national context.

The preparation of SROs is important to establish the achievements that are sought in the long term with the national research agenda. In general, concise and precise wording is required to identify the action to be taken, the expected result, and in some cases, the specific population or context. For example, for the prevention of drug use in adolescents, a strategic research objective such as “to improve the quality and impact of interventions aimed at preventing drug use in the school environment” can be proposed. In this case, the infinitive verb “to improve” is used, followed by the complement that describes the action to be carried out (“the quality and impact of interventions aimed at preventing drug use”), and the context is specified (“school environment”). This objective implies that through various types of research (whether quantitative, qualitative or mixed), evidence is obtained to improve interventions for preventing drug use in schools. Here are some examples of SROs:

Table 4. Examples of strategic research objectives related to drug use

Strategic research objectives	Relevance
1. To improve the identification of patterns of drug use in different population groups.	Through this SRO, research can be carried out to improve the understanding of trends and patterns of drug use in various populations, facilitating the identification of risk and protection factors. In addition, it can contribute to the early detection and prevention of drug use and improve the quality of the data and methodologies used in research. The results of this research can also be useful for the evaluation of policies.
2. To improve the effectiveness of preventive and therapeutic interventions associated with drug use.	Within the framework of this SRO, research can be carried out that contributes to the development of more effective strategies and programmes to prevent and treat drug use, which in turn could improve the quality of life and overall public health. To achieve this objective, studies need to be carried out that prove the effectiveness and efficiency of preventive and therapeutic interventions, as well as adapting them to the specific needs of populations.



<p>3. To improve evidence on barriers to accessing treatment services and programmes.</p>	<p>Investigating the limitations that prevent access to treatment for people with drug use problems is relevant for designing effective policies and strategies that can improve accessibility to treatment services. Studies conducted in the context of this SRO could identify barriers related to the geographical, social and cultural context. They could also explore barriers related to the lack of information on treatment services, the stigma associated with drug use, the lack of economic resources and other factors.</p>
<p>4. To develop specific preventive and therapeutic interventions associated with drug use for vulnerable populations.</p>	<p>It is important to investigate the care and treatment needs of vulnerable populations who are at higher the risk of the negative consequences of drug use and stigmatisation. This would allow the establishment of appropriate services and projects to address these specific needs. Studies carried out within the framework of this SRO can deepen the identification of these needs and develop suitable interventions for improving the prevention and treatment of drug use, reducing the associated damage and improving the quality of life of these populations. In addition, by paying attention to the specific needs of these groups, health inequalities are reduced and equity is promoted. Therefore, specific intervention strategies can be developed for vulnerable populations, such as LGBTIQ+ people, adolescents in conflict with criminal law, sex workers or homeless people, among others.</p>
<p>5. Contribute to the identification of specific drug-related meat-trafficking needs for women.</p>	<p>Women have unique and different treatment needs from men due to biological, social, and cultural factors. Research within the framework of this SRO aims to identify these specific needs and develop treatment interventions that are more effective for women. By recognising these unique needs, the barriers that prevent women from accessing appropriate treatment can be reduced in order to ensure that they receive the care they need. In addition, the implementation of specific interventions adapted to the needs of women can improve the quality of treatment and reduce the risk of relapse, thus improving the impact of the intervention.</p>



3.1.2. The relationship between priority thematic areas and strategic research objectives

A set of Strategic Research Objectives (SROs) can be created in each of the thematic areas and priority axes of the national drug policy. For example, SROs related to the control of illicit drug markets, alternative development, prevention and treatment, and epidemiological research can be designed. In addition, it is important to consider the correspondence between the priority thematic areas and the strategic research objectives, since this will allow the appropriate lines of research to be identified in the future.

Table 5. Example of alignment between priority thematic areas and strategic research objectives

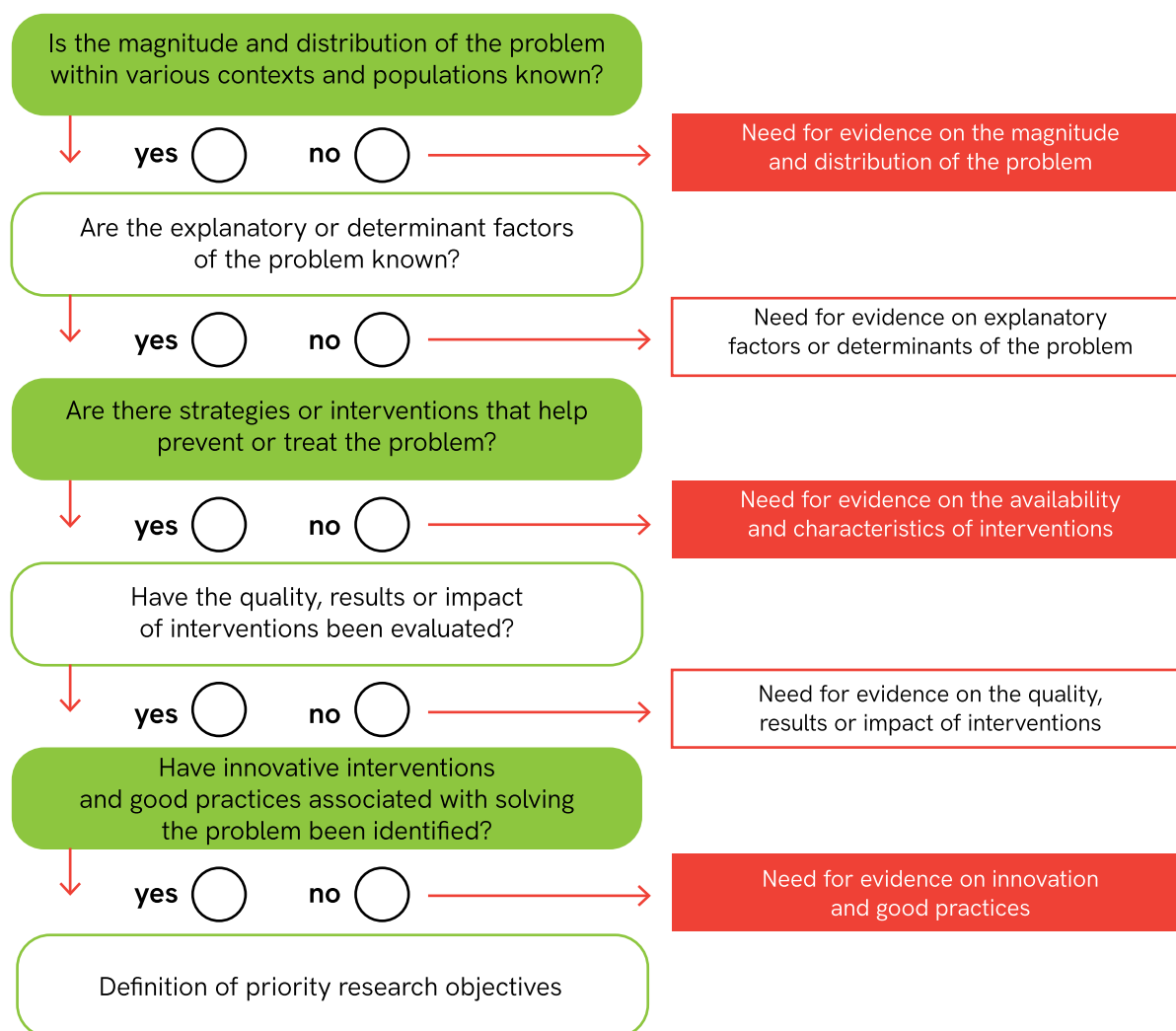
Priority thematic area (PTA)	Strategic research objective (SRO)
Drug use in specific populations	To improve the identification of patterns of drug use in different population groups.
Evaluation of programmes and services	To improve the effectiveness of preventive and therapeutic interventions associated with drug use.
Substance use in the female population	To identify specific treatment needs for women related to drug use.
Drug micro-trafficking	To identify structural factors that influence the dynamics of drug micro-trafficking.
Illegal drug markets	To analyse the dynamics and trends of the illegal drug market, including changes in the supply, demand, prices and characteristics of the substances.
Human rights and drugs	To analyse access to health services, reduction of disease transmission risks and protection against violence in people who use drugs.
Environment	To assess the environmental impact of illicit drug production, including deforestation, water and soil contamination.
Alternative development	To analyse the economic, social and environmental conditions that influence the management of alternative development projects.



3.1.3. Knowledge gap analysis

It would be beneficial during this process to implement knowledge gap analysis, which is based on the multidimensional analysis of information referred to previously. A useful methodology for analysis consists of asking a series of questions adapted to any priority thematic area (PTA). The following set of questions is an example of how this tool can be applied:

Figure 4. Knowledge gap analysis



3.1.4. Diagnosis of national capabilities for drug research

The diagnosis of national capabilities for drug research should be understood as a process that includes an evaluation of the research system in a specific country. The main purpose of this evaluation is to identify the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and challenges in the field of drug research, thus enabling the adoption of informed



decisions for improving the quality and impact of policies. To carry out this diagnosis, information on different aspects needs to be collected and analysed, such as the availability of specialised human resources, infrastructure and equipment, financing and its sources, related government policies and programmes, and inter-institutional collaboration networks.

Based on the findings of the diagnosis, it is possible to identify the current capacities to undertake the preparation and management of the agenda. The results also permit the identification of possibilities for improving drug research by encouraging cooperation between different areas, such as academic and the government sectors, together with other participants.

Table 6. Basic elements for preparing the diagnosis of national capacities for drug research

Diagnostic elements	Components
Human resources and infrastructure	<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Availability of specialised human resources.○ Infrastructure and equipment for research.○ Sources of funding.○ Government policies and programmes related to drug research.○ Impact of drug research in the country.
Evaluation of the national science and technology system	<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Presence of institutions specialising in research and development.○ Existence of clear policies and strategies for the promotion of science and technology.○ Official register of researchers.○ Availability of knowledge and technology transfer mechanisms.○ Support structures for financing.○ Disclosure of progress.
Establishment of collaboration mechanisms	<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Identification of the most relevant sectors and actors for drug research.○ Establishment of mechanisms for fostering collaboration and the exchange of knowledge and experiences between the different sectors and actors involved in drug research.○ Generation of synergies for optimising drug research in the country.



Diagnostic elements	Components
Identification of research priorities	<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Establishment of research priorities based on the strengths and opportunities identified, as well as the needs and challenges in the field of drug research in the country.○ Preparation of a strategic action plan that prioritises studies that contribute significantly to the national drug policy.

The identification of research priorities, the last aspect when diagnosing capabilities, supports the pertinence of preparing a national drug research agenda. Identifying priority research areas ensures that resources are effectively allocated and research is promoted in the areas that have the greatest impact on drug policy. In addition, the identification of research priorities is based on the analysis of the current situation and the specific needs of the country. This makes it possible to identify the research areas that require more attention and resources to face the challenges and problems that arise. Also, the definition of research priorities can foster collaboration between different actors and sectors involved in research, such as academia, government, civil society and the private sector. Thus, the agenda can become a dynamic tool and contribute to improving the quality of drug policies and actions.

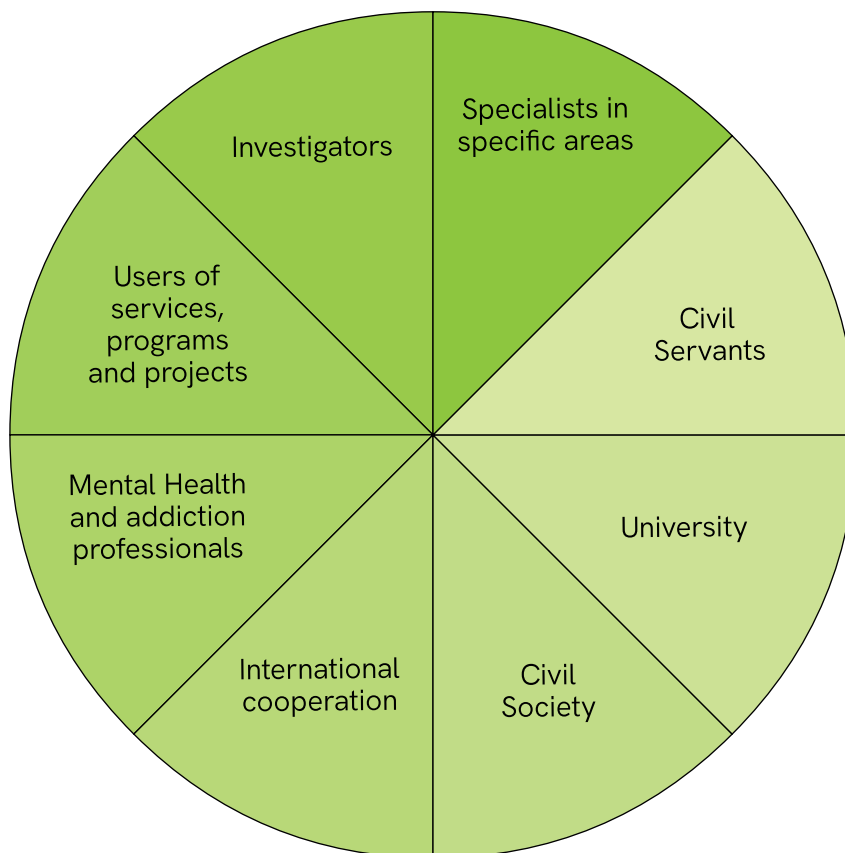
3.2. Identification and coordination with key players

Developing a national drug research agenda requires the collaboration and active engagement of multiple stakeholders in different areas, such as government, academia, civil society, and other relevant groups. It is important that both experts and non-specialised stakeholders join forces to face the challenges of improving drug policies and promote high-quality research. This collaborative approach requires clear and constant communication between the parties involved, considering their knowledge, perspectives and experiences.

In order to improve the preparation of the national drug research agenda, it is essential to involve a wide variety of professionals and related groups. These include mental health and addiction professionals, teachers, police and military personnel, and other experts in services, programmes, and projects. Their experience and expertise in areas such as drug use disorder prevention and treatment, education, law enforcement, and safety strategy and policy development can significantly enrich the agenda. In addition, it will be relevant to include users of prevention and treatment services, as well as other groups, to obtain a more complete and enriching perspective.



Figure 5. Parties involved in the development of the national drug research agenda



The NDO may consider the participation of the following key actors for the formulation of a national drug research agenda:

Table 1. Parties possibly involved in the development of the national drug research agenda

- Representatives of government institutions in charge of drug policy, such as ministries of health, justice, interior and education.
- Representatives of national research agencies or national research or science and technology councils.
- Representatives of universities and research centres, who can contribute to the generation of scientific knowledge on drugs and the training of human resources familiar with the subject.
- Representatives of civil society organisations that provide preventive or therapeutic care.



- Representatives of international organisations that can provide technical support and advice in the preparation of the national agenda.

- Representatives of organisations and groups of users of treatment prevention services and their families.

- Representatives of professional associations of doctors, psychologists, social workers, and other health professionals.

- Representatives of institutions of the judicial system (prosecutors, judiciary authority).

- Representatives of military and police forces that work to control the supply, production and trafficking of illicit drugs.

- Representatives of farmers' associations, who can contribute their experience in economic alternatives for communities affected by drug trafficking.

- Representatives of communities that have been directly affected by drug trafficking, either due to their geographical location or due to the violence generated by criminal activity.

- Representatives of companies and international organisations interested in developing economic development alternatives for areas affected by drug trafficking.

Once the process of identifying the key participants is finished, the next step should be to convene and train **thematic working groups**. These will allow for a more specific approach to the different thematic areas that will be included in the agenda, such as prevention, treatment, epidemiological research, the control of supply and alternative development, among others. Each working group must have a specific direction or coordination in order to ensure effective management when preparing the agenda. For this, it is recommended that a specialist from the NDO assume the responsibility of calling and directing the meetings, tasks and debates in each thematic group.



Table 7. Possible thematic working groups participating in the development of a national drug research agenda, according to thematic areas

PREVENTION	TREATMENT	EPIDEMIOLOGY	CONTROL	DEVELOPMENT
Participant 1	Participant 1	Participant 1	Participant 1	Participant 1
Participant 2	Participant 2	Participant 2	Participant 2	Participant 2
Participant 3	Participant 3	Participant 3	Participant 3	Participant 3
Participant 4	Participant 4	Participant 4	Participant 4	Participant 4
Participant 5	Participant 5	Participant 5	Participant 5	Participant 5
...

The process of setting research priorities starts with the number of thematic groups that have been created. For example, if five thematic groups are established, there would be five blocks or groups of research priorities. However, it is important to take into account that the number of thematic working groups will be determined in each country, according to the number of PTAs and/or the strategic axes of the national drug policy.

3.3. Definition of research priorities

During the phase of identification of themes and lines of research, it is essential to determine the knowledge areas and the specific topics within them that may be the object of research.



Table 8. Example of relationship between strategic research objectives and lines of research

Strategic research objectives	Lines of research
<p>1. To improve the identification of patterns in drug use within different population groups</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Identifying patterns in drug use within different population groups: this line of research focuses on identifying patterns of drug use in different population groups, such as young people, adults, the elderly, people of different ethnic origins, etc.○ Analysis of drug use trends in different population groups: this line of research focuses on analysing drug use trends in different population groups, such as the increase or decrease in drug use in certain population groups over a period of time.○ Identification of risk and protection factors in different population groups: this line of research focuses on identifying the specific risk and protection factors that contribute to drug use in different population groups.
<p>2. To improve the effectiveness of preventive and therapeutic interventions associated with drug use</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Research on the effectiveness of different preventive and therapeutic interventions in different population groups.○ Research on the prevention and treatment of drug use in specific settings, such as the workplace, school or prison, with the aim of developing effective interventions adapted to these situations.○ To investigate the factors that influence adherence to drug use treatment in specific populations.



Strategic research objectives	Lines of research
3. To develop specific interventions associated with drug use for vulnerable populations	<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Identification of specific barriers that prevent access to treatment for people living in rural areas○ Development of specific interventions adapted to the needs of LGBTIQ+ people who use drugs.○ Evaluation of the effectiveness of specific interventions for migrant populations that use drugs.○ Analysis of the cultural factors that influence drug use and the development of specific interventions adapted to the needs of different cultural groups.
4. Identify specific treatment needs for women	<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Research on the barriers that prevent women from accessing treatment and care services for drug use.○ To develop and evaluate specific interventions for women that address issues related to motherhood, including the prevention of prenatal drug exposure○ To assess the accessibility and quality of drug treatment services for women, including the availability of women-specific treatment options and the training of health personnel on gender issues

To improve drug policy, it is essential to identify knowledge gaps and develop research that narrows the divide between the current situation and the desired objectives. In this regard, it is a priority to investigate areas that have been less studied and that require more scientific evidence, whether in prevention, treatment, damage reduction, control of illicit markets or alternative development. The feasibility of the research must also be evaluated from political, technical, financial and operational perspectives, including the availability of necessary resources and the possibility of accessing them through agreements and partnerships. Finally, the possible impacts of the research on the population and on the health system should be analysed, prioritising those issues that have a greater expected impact and a high probability of being implemented in clinical and political practice.



NDOs could consider the following prioritisation criteria:

- a. Knowledge gap:** identification of any areas where knowledge generation is required in order to close the gap between the current situation and the desired goal. Priority will be given to topics that have been less studied and where there is a greater need for scientific evidence.
- b. Feasibility:** evaluating the feasibility of carrying out the required research from a political, technical, financial and operational perspective. The availability of necessary resources and the possibility of accessing them through agreements, partnerships or other mechanisms will be considered.
- c. Impact or consequences:** analysis of the effects that the research could have on various populations and on the national drug policy. Priority will be given to topics with the greatest expected impact and that have a high probability of being implemented in practice and policy.

It is advisable to assign a rating to the prioritisation criteria. In this case, a numerical value is assigned to each research requirement, determining its relevance. For example, a scale of 1 to 5 can be used, where 1 represents a very low rating and represents 5 a very high rating. Assigning a rating makes for better understanding and facilitates decision-making.



Table 2. Proposed matrix for prioritising lines of research

Priority theme area evaluation of programmes and services					
Strategic research objective	Lines of Research	Prioritisation criteria / Evaluation of points 1-5			Score Total
		Knowledge gap	Feasibility	Effects or consequences	
To improve the effectiveness of preventive and therapeutic interventions associated with drug use.	Research on the effectiveness of different preventive and therapeutic interventions in different population groups.				
	Research on the prevention and treatment of drug use in specific settings, such as the workplace, school or prisons, with the aim of developing effective interventions adapted to these situations.				
	To investigate the factors that influence adherence to drug use treatment in specific populations.				
	Perceptions, opinions and attitudes of operators of services, programmes and projects.				
	Perceptions, opinions and attitudes of users of services, programmes and projects.				

Rating: 1 = very low 2 = low 3 = medium 4 = high 5 = very high

3.4. Data Collection

3.4.1. Considerations for the design and application of questionnaires

Questionnaires are useful for canvassing opinions from researchers, professionals and other stakeholders. In fact, they have an important application in the context of identifying research priorities (e.g., Frazier et al., 2018; Hubbard et al., 2022). To collect feedback on research priorities, the questionnaire should have specific and carefully designed questions that address key issues. Questions should be clear, direct, and relevant, and should include space for respondents to express additional opinions. It is recommended that **specific questionnaires for each prioritised thematic area** be made.



A list of sample questions might include:

-
- What are the biggest drug policy challenges that research should address?

 - What existing policies or programmes need research to determine their impact?

 - What are the biggest knowledge gaps that need to be addressed in the future?

 - Which populations should be addressed as a higher priority for research?

 - What research methodologies should be used to assess the impact of drug policies?

 - What are your suggestions for key areas of research that should be prioritised in the future?
-

When designing the agenda, the NDO team can consider the following steps for applying questionnaires:

-
- 1. Identifying respondents:** identifying respondents could be an important task in itself. Respondents may be experts in a specific field of drug policy (epidemiology, prevention, treatment, damage reduction, control of illicit markets, alternative development), researchers, or other relevant stakeholders. To ensure broad participation and representativeness, it may be useful to convene people from different areas and geographical regions.

 - 2. Design of the questionnaires:** to design the questionnaires aimed at identifying research priorities in the field of drugs, it is recommended to follow a methodology that allows the collection of precise and relevant information. First of all, the objective of the questionnaire and the dimensions of the analysis to be evaluated must be clearly defined. Next, open or closed questions can be constructed that specifically address each dimension and appropriate response options must be offered. In the case of closed questions, the Likert scale can be used to measure the opinion or attitude of the respondents on an ordinal scale (from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree” or from “not at all important” to “very important”). Additionally, multiple-choice questions can be used to allow respondents to choose from several pre-defined options and can also include the option “other” to collect additional information. Likewise, the matrix for prioritising of lines of research can be included.

 - 3. Distributing and collecting the questionnaires:** the distribution of questionnaires can be done in several ways. The electronic route could be an efficient and cheap way to access and collect data. Respondents would be sent an online questionnaire. Paper questionnaires could also be used if there is no access to technology or if more personalised information needs to be collected.



-
4. **Analysis of responses:** the analysis of responses will require clustering of similar responses and identification of patterns. This can be done through basic descriptive statistical analysis (e.g. frequency, percentage, averages), depending on the design of the questions and response options.

 5. **Defining priorities:** with the statistical findings, research priorities could be established.

 6. **Presentation of results:** the results of the questionnaire and the definition of priorities can be presented in a report. It is important to include a clear and easily accessible summary of the main conclusions and recommendations, together with a detailed description of the methodology used to collect and analyse the data.

3.4.2. Considerations for conducting face-to-face and virtual focus groups

The focus group (FG) technique is used to collect qualitative data by engaging with members of a community, population, or subgroup about topics of interest or research. This technique implies the participation of one or more researchers, who use some means of recording (audio, video or written notes) to later analyse the information obtained. An important advantage of this technique is its ability to collect relevant data in a short period of time. FGs have been widely used in mental health research priority-setting processes (e.g. Banfield et al., 2014; Zitko et al., 2017).

Using this technique creates a structured situation. Topics and questions are predefined, a venue and context for the meeting are selected, criteria for inviting participants are established, and decisions are made about the issues to be discussed and how the discussions will be conducted. The choice of FG must be based on the purpose that will be fulfilled in the design of the agenda. **Focus groups will be particularly useful for obtaining opinions, perceptions and points of view on drug research priorities.** As with the questionnaires, it is recommended that a **specific FG be carried out for each priority thematic area.**

In terms of executing the FG, the following steps can be applied:

-
- a. **Selection of participants:** a small group of people who share similar characteristics in relation to the topic in question is selected. For example, if the aim is to obtain research priorities on epidemiological aspects of drug use, experts or specialists in that matter would be selected.

 - b. **Group preparation:** a previous meeting is held with the participants to explain the objective of the study, ensure their participation and establish the rules of the group.



-
- c. **Moderation:** the group is moderated by a host or moderator, who is responsible for conducting the discussion and ensuring that the objectives of the FG are met.

 - d. **Discussion:** a guided discussion is held on the topic in question. The moderator asks open-ended questions to stimulate discussion and elicit a wide variety of opinions.

 - e. **Recording:** the discussion is recorded by means of an audio or video recording and written notes.

 - f. **Analysis:** the responses obtained during the discussion are analysed to identify patterns and trends.

 - g. **Presentation of results:** the results of the study are presented in a detailed report.
-

Virtual focus groups (VFG) are an alternative to face-to-face focus groups. They are carried out online through communication platforms. This modality allows the limitation of gathering a group in one place to be overcome, especially in those groups with complicated schedules or locations (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2016). In general, the use of VFGs can broaden the selection of participants and add flexibility to the process of building a national drug research agenda.

The method is similar to that of face-to-face focus groups, although it presents some differences:

-
- It is recommended to have half as many participants as would be in a face-to-face focus group. That is, 4-5 participants instead of 8-10. It is advisable to recruit more participants than necessary to compensate for possible absences.

 - The technological skills of the participants must be taken into account.

 - Informed consent must be obtained, including consent to being recorded. This can be done the same day of the VFG or one day before.

 - Ideally these sessions should not last more than an hour, due to people's limited ability to focus and stay engaged in an online format.

 - Adjustments to the data collection tools, including the discussion guide: The discussion guide can be adapted to the desired duration of the groups. Activities should be adapted to suit an online format.

 - Adjustments to materials: Any intervention material that is presented during the VFG must be carefully prepared in a format that can be displayed online. Web platforms such as Zoom or others allow you to play videos or display various visual resources.



Table 3. Sample session guide for virtual focus group

Moment	Procedure	Time
<p>Induction: Introduction and motivation</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Introduction of moderator and welcome to the participants. 2. Presentation of general instructions and situate group in the context: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Participants activate their audios and cameras and the objective of the meeting is explained to them ● Ask for permission to record. ● Explain rules: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Everyone must give their opinion (to do so they make use of the audio and the zoom chat or another application). ○ Participants must take care to see to it that only one person at a time speaks. ○ Encourage participants to say what they think, not what they think others want to hear. <p>Key message: There are no wrong opinions.</p>	<p>5 minutes</p>
<p>Conduct of the session: Group discussion and analysis</p>	<p>Identification of treatment research priorities</p> <p>Provide a brief introduction about the need for a national agenda on drugs in the corresponding area. The following key questions can then be asked:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● What research do you consider to be a priority in order to advance our understanding and improve the treatment of substance use disorders? ● What are the main research topics that you think should be addressed? ● Are there any areas of research that you feel have been neglected or need more attention? <p>Opinions and perceptions on drug research</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● What do you think about the current state of drug research? ● What do you think about the level of funding and government support for research in this field? ● What about data collection and other research materials? Are they sufficient and accessible? ● What can you tell me about the quality and availability of databases? 	<p>45 minutes</p>



Moment	Procedure	Time
Conduct of the session: Group discussion and analysis	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● What do you think about current research methodologies in the field of drugs? Are you happy, satisfied, or do you not see them as very appropriate? Why?● For example, what are the limitations of current research? What research methods are most effective?● Do you have any additional comments on these topics?● What do you expect from drug research in the future?● What might motivate you, or other researchers, to do more drug research?● What would you recommend to government authorities and research institutions for improving drug research?	45 minutes
Closing the session	<p>The moderator can close the session with the following questions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">● Is there anything you'd like to add in relation to the topics we've talked about?● Is there anything that you can think of that I have not asked but that you consider important to mention in relation to these topics that we are discussing? <p>That was the last question. Thank you all very much for your participation in this study.</p> <p>The moderator thanks all members for their participation. Then he/she invites everyone to participate in one last dynamic:</p> <p>Finally, each participant writes (in the chat or on a virtual whiteboard) a message or positive wish for the improvement of research in the area. The moderator reads the messages.</p> <p>Finally, the moderator says goodbye.</p>	10 minutes



3.4.3. Considerations for conducting participatory workshops

Participatory workshops (PW) are favourable spaces for gathering the knowledge, interests, perceptions, expectations and commitment of the various actors involved in developing the agenda. Participatory workshops are a highly effective collaborative tool. These workshops not only create an environment for dialogue and listening that facilitates decision-making but also promote critical reflection and understanding from various perspectives, allowing for more informed decision-making.

Specifically, in the context of developing a national drug research agenda, participatory workshops can be particularly beneficial in achieving consensus on research priorities. In addition, the information obtained directly from the participants in these workshops is very valuable for improving or refining content.

Although participatory workshops require moderators who are knowledgeable about the subject and adequate and sufficient teaching resources, the time and effort invested in them can be extremely valuable for achieving an agenda with a high level of consensus and legitimacy.



Table 4. Example of the basic structure of a methodological guide for the implementation of a participatory workshop for identifying research priorities

Participatory workshop: consensus for the identification of research priorities (prevention, treatment and epidemiology)			
Number of participants: 40 Location: Auditorium - National Drug Agency, from 9:30 a.m. to 11:30 a.m. Personnel: 1 moderator and 3 assistants			
Workshop stages	Objective	Activities	Time
Stage 1: Presentation of the methodology	Present the workshop objectives and work methodology	<p>Welcome and presentation of the workshop objectives.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● The moderator offers a few words of welcome to the participants for their involvement in the workshop, mentioning some general considerations: freedom of expression and respect for opinions. ● Presentation of the NDO work team in charge of executing the workshop. ● The logical sequence that will guide the identification or consensus on drug research priorities will be presented. At this stage, the NDO team will describe the initial process for diagnosing knowledge and capability gaps for research, as well as the priority thematic areas (PTA) and strategic research objectives (SRO). It is important to emphasise to participants that the research priorities must be aligned with the PTA and SRO. However, new topics could possibly be proposed and submitted to be considered for inclusion. 	10 min.
Stage 2: Group work to identify and prioritise problems	Assign groups and work topics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Participants are divided into three groups according to subject areas ("prevention", "treatment" and "epidemiology"). ● The moderator presents the work topics that each group will address in the workshop, which should be related to drug prevention, treatment, and epidemiology. 	10 min.



Workshop stages	Objective	Activities	Time
Stage 3: Group work for prioritisation	Identify research priorities by area or theme	<p>Research priorities will be identified in each of the priority thematic areas (PTA) and strategic research objectives (SRO). To achieve this, the following activities will be carried out:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">● Each group must analyse the corresponding PTA and SRO and identify research priorities.● Each group must justify their choice based on the criteria of feasibility, impact and knowledge gap.● There will be a discussion space to assign an order of priority.● Each group will make a list in order of priority.● Then, the groups will present their list of priorities to the plenary. There will be a space for comments and suggestions.● The other groups make comments, provide suggestions and propose possible collaborations or connections between the prioritised research topics.	90 min.
Stage 4: Consensus	Establish consensus for the definition of the national research agenda	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● The moderator leads a joint discussion on the identified research priorities and how these can be integrated into a “National Drug Research Agenda”.● The groups make a final review and adjustment to their prioritised lists of research topics based on the joint discussion.● The moderator collects and summarises the research priorities agreed by each group and presents them in an organised manner according to the PTA and SRO.● A single list of research priorities for each thematic area is discussed and consensus sought.	30 min.



Workshop stages	Objective	Activities	Time
Closing		<ul style="list-style-type: none">● A follow-up commitment is proposed in the implementation of the “National Drug Research Agenda”.● The participants are invited to share their impressions, reflections and suggestions on the work process carried out during the workshop.● Participants are provided with a form or survey to share their assessment of the workshop and provide feedback on their experience.● Attendees are thanked for their participation and commitment in the preparation of the national drug research agenda.● Finally, participants are invited to continue collaborating in the future in the agenda’s different research and implementation efforts.	10 min.

3.4.4. Considerations for applying the Delphi method

The Delphi method is a useful tool for identifying research priorities in any field (Hart & Wade, 2020; Hauck et al., 2007; Mikton et al., 2017). Although there may be variations in its execution, the Delphi method has some common features that set it apart from other priority identification techniques.

First, a group of experts or panellists is selected specifically based on their experience and knowledge on the subject to be discussed. Next, a series of two or more sequential questionnaires called “rounds” are administered and are used to collect and collate ideas and opinions about research priorities. In the initial phase, panellists generate a list of possible topics and may also propose new areas of research. In subsequent rounds, participants receive a summary of the panel’s responses and are asked to reconsider and adjust their original responses.

Questionnaires are an important part of the Delphi method for identifying research priorities. In general, questionnaires are normally created after the literature has been reviewed, the relevant people consulted and the context has been considered. It may also be useful to run a pilot application to determine the readability and relevance of the questions. It is recommended that the questionnaire for the first round (Q1) be more open and unstructured, containing open questions that encourage participants to “brainstorm.” Likewise, the use of online questionnaires could be appropriate. After



distributing the questionnaire, follow-up is recommended, as high response rates help increase the credibility of the results.

Table 5. Example of an initial questionnaire using the Delphi method for the identification of research priorities in drug epidemiology

Questionnaire 1
<p>The National Observatory on Drugs wishes to know your opinion on the research needs in our country in relation to the epidemiology of drug use. This request is part of the National Drug Strategy and the objective is to improve the identification of patterns of drug use in different population groups.</p> <p>We appreciate your responses to the questions in this short survey. Thank you!</p>
<p>Your speciality:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="radio"/> Epidemiology of drug use<input type="radio"/> Public health<input type="radio"/> Psychology<input type="radio"/> Psychiatry and mental health<input type="radio"/> Nursing<input type="radio"/> Other:.....
<p>Institution:</p> <p>1. Are you currently involved in research related to drug use?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="radio"/> Yes<input type="radio"/> No <p>If the answer is yes, what is your main area of development?</p>



2. Taking into account your knowledge and experience, indicate the 10 research needs related to the epidemiology of drug use:
a.
b.
c.
d.
e.
f.
g.
h.
i.
j.
3. Any additional observations or comments? Thank you very much

The questionnaire in the second round (Q2) of the Delphi method is built from the data collected in Q1. Commonly, Q2 has a quantitative orientation with closed questions that include response options or Likert-type agreement scales. Once the Q2 data are collected, descriptive analyses of the responses can begin. The elaboration of a third questionnaire (Q3) can be considered to ratify or change answers. This will depend on the availability of time and resources. It is suggested that feedback be provided to the participants with the quantitative information obtained. This provides a visual means to assess the diversity of responses.



Table 6. Example of the second questionnaire using the Delphi method to identify research priorities in the epidemiology of drug use

Questionnaire 2
<p>Thank you for agreeing to be contacted to continue the work of identifying research priorities in the epidemiology of drug use.</p> <p>We have reviewed the responses to the first questionnaire and have identified the most important research priorities. We would appreciate your help to further improve these priorities. Thank you.</p>
<p>1. Please rank the 10 research priorities listed below. (1=MOST important, 10=LEAST important):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">a. Study on alcohol consumption patterns in the LGBTIQ+ population.b. Identification of new psychoactive substances and their impact on public health.c. Risk and protection factors associated with drug use in women.d. Magnitudes and risk factors of drug use in the homeless population.e. Impact of regulations for reducing tobacco consumption.f. Prevalence and risk factors in the university population.g. Characterisation of the use of designer drugs in the context of night-life.h. Drug use and crime.i. Prevalence and risk factors in the school population.j. Mortality associated with the consumption of psychoactive substances.
<p>2. Do you think these 10 research priorities accurately reflect drug use epidemiology priorities in your region?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="radio"/> Yes.<input type="radio"/> No. <p>If No, please provide details of any additional research priorities that should be considered:</p>



3. Are the research priorities understandable in their current format?

- Yes.
- No.

If the answer is No, please provide a comment:

4. Do you have any additional comments?

3.4.5. Proposal for the integration of data collection techniques

After providing several considerations on alternatives for data collection, it is suggested that NDOs integrate these techniques. The preparation of a National Drug Research Agenda is a process that requires various steps and the collaboration of various actors.

First, the NDO team identifies priority thematic areas (PTA) and strategic research objectives (SRO) based on the needs analysis and the national drug policy. Next, key actors are identified and coordinated and working groups are formed according to the area or dimension of drug policy. Afterwards, focus groups are held, either face-to-face or virtually, for the initial identification of research needs.

Once the first ideas have been collected, a first questionnaire (Q1) is prepared and sent with the initial identification of the research priorities. The answers to the first questionnaire are analysed and a first version of the research priorities is prepared.

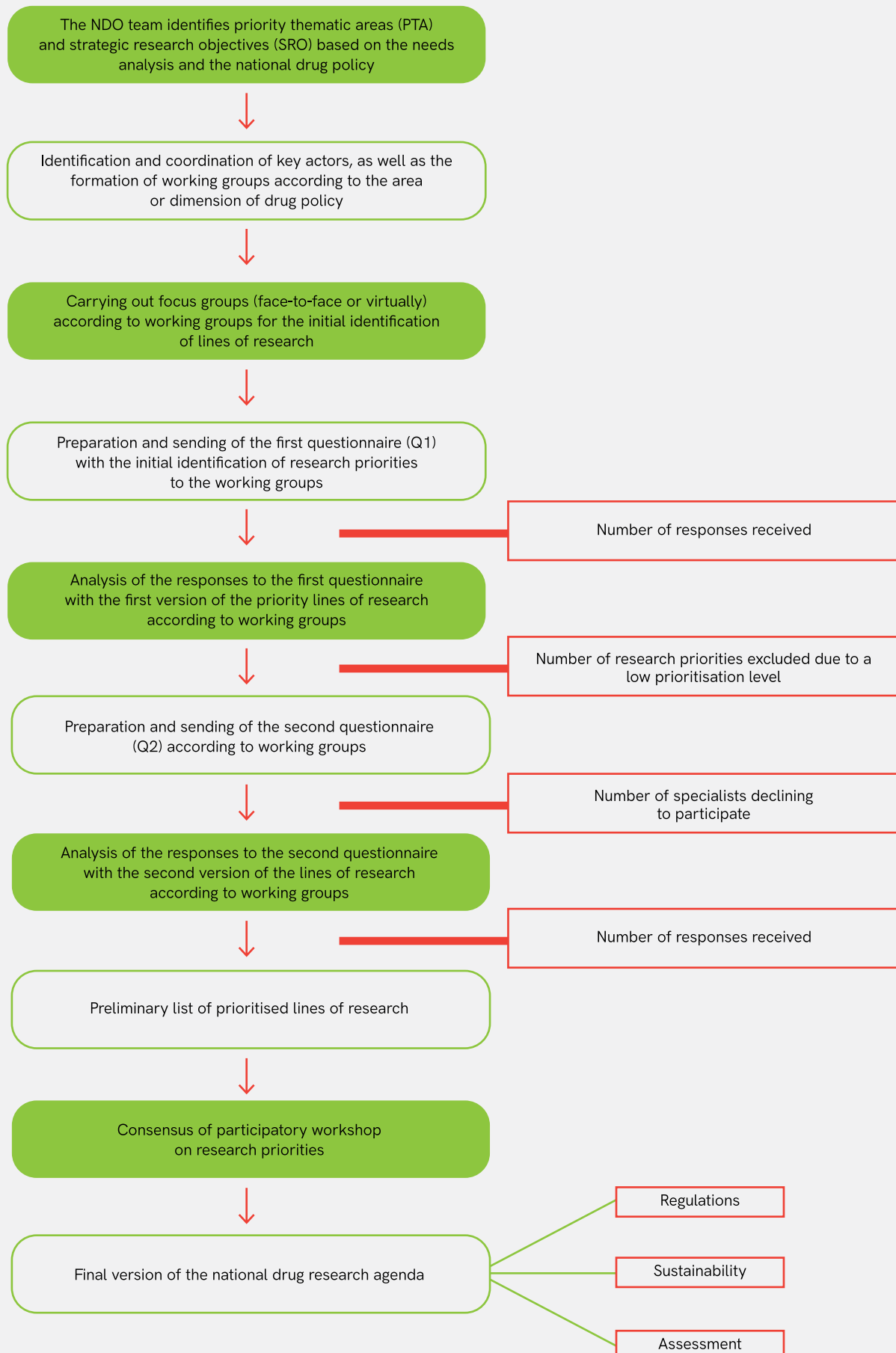
Then, we proceed to prepare and send the second questionnaire (Q2) to the working groups. The responses to the second questionnaire are analysed for the preparation of a second version of the research priorities. Based on this, a list of priorities is drawn up, which is shared in a participatory consensus workshop in which the content is discussed and adjusted. Once the research priorities have been agreed upon, the final version of the National Drug Research Agenda is drawn up.

It is important to highlight that regulations, sustainability and evaluation are key elements in the management of the agenda. Regulations ensure that research is carried out with a supporting legal framework, while sustainability ensures that the agenda is properly implemented over time. Finally, the evaluation makes it possible to measure the results of the agenda.

The planning of these activities should be done on the basis of a schedule. The time for preparing the agenda will depend on the resources available in each NDO. Figure 6 illustrates the sequence to follow:



Figure 6. The NDO team identifies priority thematic areas (PTA) and strategic research objectives (SRO) based on the needs analysis and the national drug policy





3.5. Data analysis

Different analysis options can be explored according to institutional capacities and the NDO technical team profile. The use of various tools, such as questionnaires, focus groups and the Delphi method, provides valuable information that can be analysed from different approaches: quantitative, qualitative or mixed. For example, questionnaires are useful for obtaining numerical information on research priorities and the characteristics of the participants when developing the agenda. Focus groups, on the other hand, provide information about the perceptions, opinions and attitudes of the participants. Finally, the Delphi method allows the exploration of opinions, articulating quantitative and qualitative information.

3.5.1. Quantitative analysis

From the use of questionnaires it is possible to calculate the average scores obtained with which each research priority has been selected. This analysis will be carried out in each working group according to each thematic priority area. Based on the averages obtained, a ranking can be obtained in which an order of priority can be established.

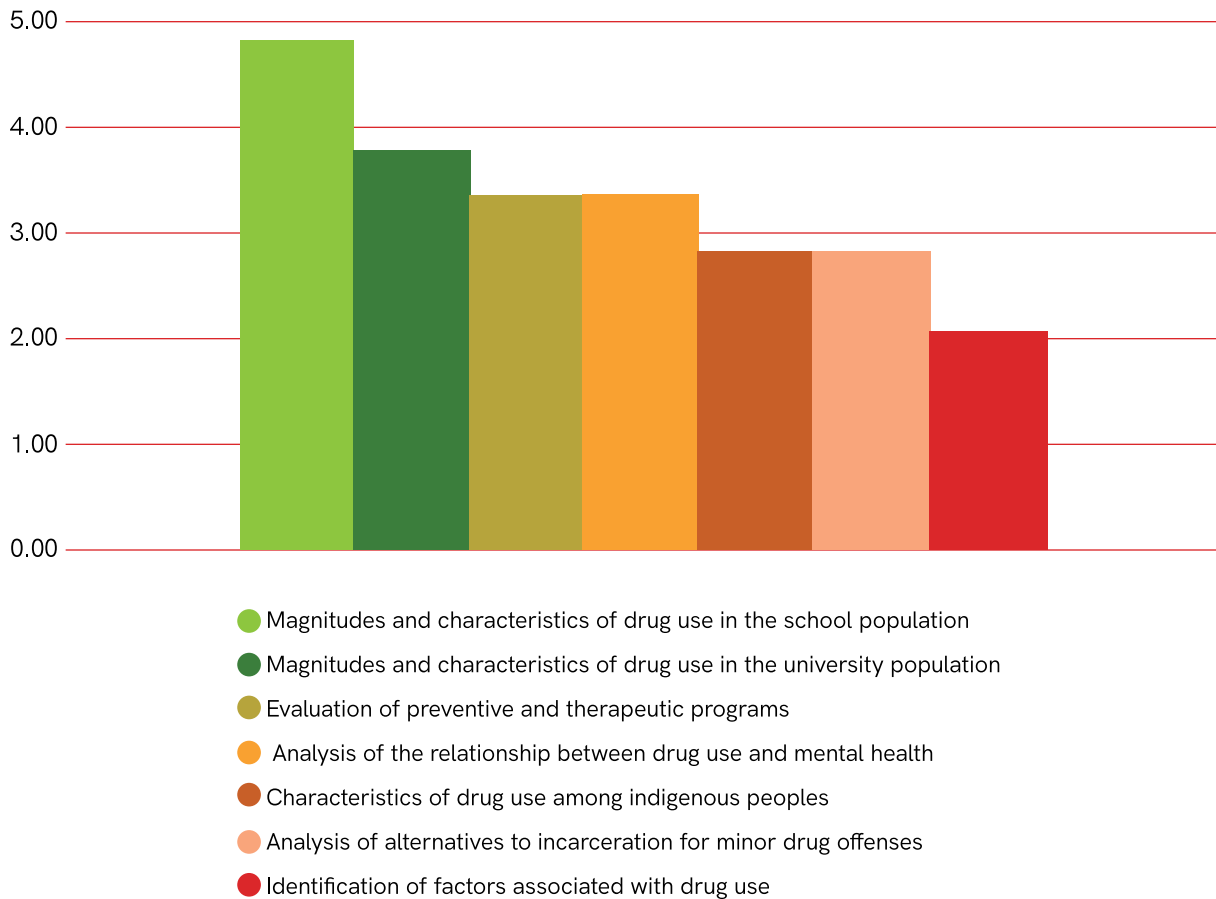
Table 9. Example of ordering research priorities using average scores

Research needs	Priorities	Average
Magnitudes and characteristics of drug use in the school population.	1	4,80
Magnitudes and characteristics of drug use in the university population.	2	3,76
Evaluation of preventive and therapeutic programmes.	3	3,35
Analysis of the relationship between drug use and mental health.	4	3,32
Characteristics of drug use in indigenous peoples.	5	2,80
Analysis of alternatives to incarceration for minor drug offences.	6	2,55
Identification of factors associated with drug use.	7	2,05



They can also be conveyed through graphs:

Figure 1. Example of ranking research priorities using average scores



3.5.2. Qualitative analysis

Regarding the qualitative analysis of the information obtained in the focus groups, thematic analysis (TA) can be useful. TA is the process of identifying patterns or themes within qualitative data. The goal of a thematic analysis is to identify themes, that is, patterns in the data that are important.

To carry out a thematic analysis, these six phases can be followed (Braun & Clarke, 2006):

- 1. Familiarise yourself with the data:** it is key to read and re-read the data to become familiar with it. This step is important to understand and identify thoughts or ideas that are relevant to our analysis. It is also important to note that this step is not a one-time process and may need to be repeated throughout the job.

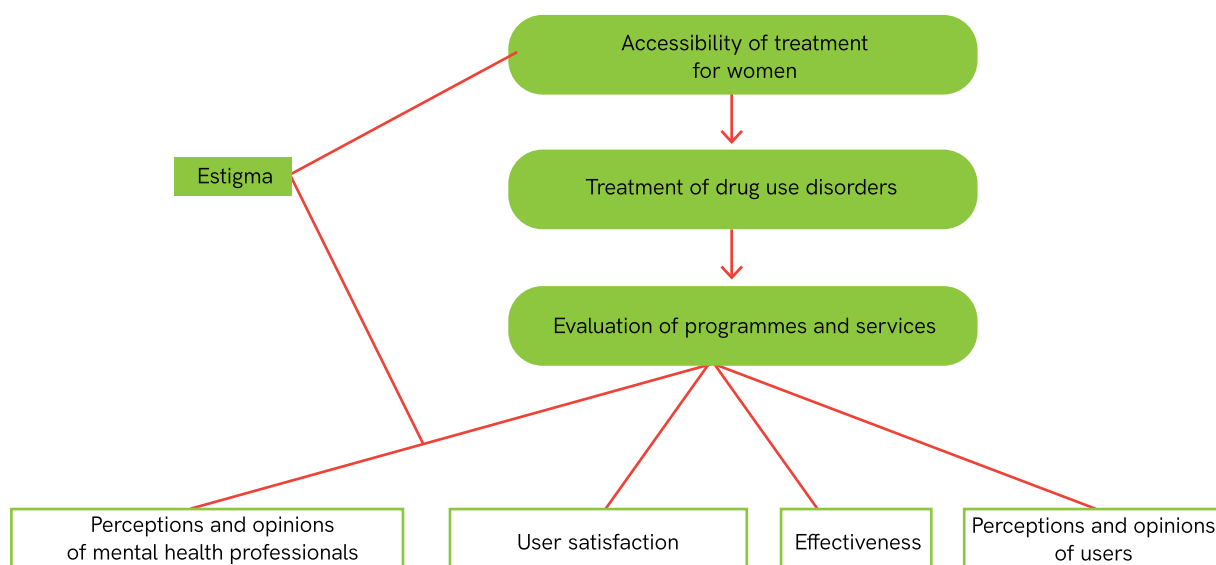


2. **Generate initial codes:** identify and label different pieces of data with codes that represent themes and sub-themes. These codes can be descriptive, interpretive, or both. It is important to note that the codes must be based on the information collected from the participants and not on preconceived ideas or assumptions. This step is important as it helps to identify the key characteristics of the data and to start the process of organising the data into meaningful themes.
3. **Theme search:** this step involves looking for patterns or themes through the codes and grouping them together. This can be done by comparing and contrasting the codes and identifying similarities and differences. It is important to note that interpretation and analysis of the issues that arise are required. Additionally, it is important to remain open to new issues that may emerge during the analysis.
4. **Review Topics:** it is necessary to check that the topics make sense and are consistent with the data. This can be done by reviewing the codes and data that support each topic and subtopic. It is important to ensure that the topics are not too broad or too narrow and that they accurately reflect the expressions given by the participants. Additionally, it is important to consider the relationships between the themes and how they relate to the identification of research priorities.
5. **Define and name themes:** define and name topics based on their content and meaning. This step involves identifying the essence of each theme and determining what aspect of the data each theme captures. It is important to ensure that each topic is coherent and internally consistent. This can be done by organising the data extracts for each theme into a coherent and meaningful story with an accompanying narrative.
6. **Producing the report:** writing the analysis, including quotes to support the identification of themes and sub-themes, is a useful strategy for communicating qualitative findings. Including direct quotes from participants allows for a direct connection to their voices and perceptions. In addition, considering the richness of the information collected, the development of a “thematic map” could further enrich the presentation of results.

It is important to note that these guidelines are not hard-and-fast rules; they can be applied flexibly to suit the agenda design context. Additionally, it is pertinent to indicate that these six steps do not imply a linear process.



Figure 7. Example of the final structure of the National Drug Research Agenda



3.6. Preparation of the final version of the national research agenda

The structure of the final agenda document must be clear, coherent and easy to follow. Here is the suggested guide structure:

Table 7. Example of the final structure of the National Drug Research Agenda

National Drug Research Agenda
<p>Cover Page: Include the document title, the name of the responsible institution or body, and the date of publication. It is also very important to specify the validity period of the agenda (e.g., National Drug Research Agenda 2023-2030).</p>
<p>Contents: Provide a table of contents that lists the section headings and subheadings, along with their corresponding page numbers. This will make it easier to review specific sections of the document.</p>
<p>Introduction: Present the purpose and objectives of the agenda, as well as a brief description of the national context regarding drug research. Explain why it is necessary to develop a national research agenda and how the country will benefit from this strategic document.</p>



Background: address the importance of drug research in the national and international context, highlighting the main trends and challenges in this field. This section should include a review of existing national and international drug-related policies and strategies and how the proposed agenda aligns with these approaches.

Methodology: describe the process and tools used to identify and prioritise research areas. Include details about the participation of experts and other actors, the review of relevant literature, and the conduct of focus groups, workshops or the application of questionnaires to obtain the information. Also, explain the selection criteria used to identify research priorities.

Priority research areas: list and describe the key research areas identified in the national agenda. Explain the importance of each area and how they relate to the objectives of the national drug policy.

Financing and support mechanisms: indicate the funding sources and support mechanisms available for drug research in the country, including government programmes, international cooperation, and opportunities in the private sector.

Coordination and collaboration: address the importance of cooperation and coordination among the different actors involved in drug research, including government agencies, academic institutions, and non-governmental organisations. Include recommendations for fostering collaboration, such as the creation of a national research network that contributes to the improvement of policies and interventions.

Assessment and monitoring: Describe the monitoring and evaluation mechanisms for facilitating the effective implementation of the agenda and for measuring its impact through indicators.

Appendices: include any relevant additional material, such as lists of experts consulted, glossaries, bibliographies, or links to useful resources.



4. Sustainability and evaluation mechanisms

4.1. Preparation of approval regulations

In order to achieve the institutionalisation of a drug research agenda, it is necessary to develop a standard that will contribute to its sustainability and continuity. Although variations in the political, social and cultural context of each country may influence the process, three general considerations are of great importance:

- a. Establishing a commission or working group:** it is necessary to involve different stakeholders, such as experts in the field, representatives of government institutions, civil society and academia in the process of developing regulations for a national drug research agenda. The NDO team should lead and coordinate this process.
- b. Review of the current legal framework in relation to the regulations associated with the approval of research priorities in other government sectors:** in this section, an analysis will be made of the current legal framework governing the government in relation to the formulation and approval of research priorities. A detailed review of the rules and regulations that guide decision-making on which areas of research should be addressed with greater emphasis in various government sectors (e.g. public safety, public health, education, among others) will be carried out.
- c. Identify the public entity responsible for approving the regulations:** during the development of the proposed regulations for a national research agenda on drugs, it is important to identify the government institution or ministry that will have the responsibility of officially issuing the regulations. Furthermore, a country may have several sets of regulations that focus on different aspects of drug policy. For example, the interior or justice ministries (or their equivalents in each country) may approve research priorities related to the control of illegal drug markets, while the education and health ministries may issue regulations related to prevention actions and treatment.



Table 8. Example of key content of a regulatory document for the approval of an agenda National Drug Research

Approval standard of a national drug research agenda
<p>THE FOLLOWING IS APPROVED:</p> <hr/> <p>Article 1.- The content of the “National Drug Research Agenda 2023-2033”, which includes research priorities for the development of public policies on the prevention and treatment of drug use in the national territory. This research is detailed below:</p> <hr/> <ul style="list-style-type: none">● Research to ascertain the magnitude and characteristics of drug use in vulnerable populations.<hr/>● Research to ascertain the factors associated with drug use.<hr/>● Impact evaluation of programmes to prevent drug use in schools, families and communities.<hr/>● Research to understand the stigmatisation of drug users.<hr/>● Evaluation of services and treatment programmes for drug use disorders.<hr/>● Research to ascertain the perceptions and attitudes of users of prevention and treatment programmes and services.
<p>Article 2.- The authorities in charge of the implementation of drug policies must implement the necessary mechanisms to carry out prioritised research, and must report their developments to the National Drugs Observatory of the National Drug Commission.</p>
<p>Article 3.- The National Drugs Observatory of the National Drug Commission must monitor the implementation, by the responsible authorities, of the identified priority lines of research, as well as the promotion and financing mechanisms for their execution.</p>



4.2. Strengthening or development of human resource capacities

To ensure the sustainability and institutionalisation of a national drug research agenda, it is necessary to consolidate and develop technical skills in human resources. Research competencies comprise a comprehensive set of knowledge, skills, and attitudes essential for designing rigorous and appropriate strategies, choosing appropriate methods and techniques, applying them effectively and ethically to obtain valuable results, and systematically and transparently communicating findings and conclusions.

These competencies not only include technical and methodological skills associated with conducting research but also a critical, reflective and ethical approach to research. In addition, they encompass an understanding of social, cultural, and political contexts. By adopting this comprehensive and informed approach, a more comprehensive perspective in drug research is fostered, which in turn drives the effectiveness and impact of policies and strategies implemented in this field.

To consolidate these competencies, a “national drug research skills curriculum” could be established that includes a set of skills, knowledge and technical competencies necessary to carry out drug research effectively and sustainably. This curriculum would be designed to ensure that researchers and professionals working in drug research in the country have the necessary training and knowledge to carry out rigorous, high-quality research. Additionally, it would be regularly updated to reflect new trends and advances in the field and would be adapted to the specific needs of the country.

- Knowledge of the main theories and approaches in the field of drug research.
- Ability to design and execute rigorous and ethical research projects.
- Knowledge of the different types of research methodologies and data analysis techniques.
- Ability to analyse, interpret and present research results in a clear and concise manner.
- Mastery of sampling techniques and participant selection strategies in epidemiological and field studies.
- Ability to work in a team and collaborate with other researchers and experts in the field of drugs.
- Responsibility for the management and analysis of quantitative data through the use of statistical software.



<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Ability to apply knowledge about the gender perspective and human rights in drug research.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Knowledge in the design and planning of drug research studies, including the definition of objectives, hypotheses and study variables.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Ability to critically evaluate existing literature in the field of drug research.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Ability to effectively communicate research findings to different audiences.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Mastery of the ethical and legal aspects of drug research, including obtaining informed consent and protecting the confidentiality of the participants.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Ability to adapt to changes in research methodologies.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Ability to analyse qualitative and mixed data, including the application of content analysis techniques and other analysis tools.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Ability to develop collaborative networks and establish relationships with key players in the field of drug research.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Ability to select and apply appropriate methodologies to the research objectives, such as surveys, interviews, case studies, among others.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Ability to identify new research areas and contribute to the advancement of knowledge in the field of drugs.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Ability to identify scientific literature in the field of drugs, including the application of systematic reviews and meta-analyses.

To develop an effective strategy for technical strengthening in the area of drug research, the following considerations can be taken into account:

- 1. Needs Assessment:** it is essential to identify the educational and training needs of personnel in the area of drug research. This involves identifying knowledge gaps among current staff and defining the skills and competencies needed to implement the national drug research agenda.
- 2. Identification of priority training areas:** the priority areas of research serve as a guide to identify the main areas of training, ensuring that the specific needs of the country are addressed.



3. **Design of a training and education plan:** it is important to have a rigorous and detailed plan for training and education in the area of drug research. This plan should include objectives, methodologies, deadlines, budgets, and evaluation strategies. Additionally, it is important to consider the diversity of audiences, as well as online or face-to-face training options.
4. **Implementation of the plan:** a team is required for the execution of research skills development programmes. The NDO team can identify experts to carry out the training activities. To ensure the quality of the implementation process, it is important to establish a detailed work plan, that describes the specific activities to be carried out, the associated deadlines and the necessary budget for each of them.
5. **Monitoring and assessment:** it is important to carry out continuous monitoring and evaluation of the training spaces to determine whether the objectives of technical strengthening have been met. This involves measuring the impact of education and training on the results of drug research, the continuity of trained personnel, and the improvement of the quality of research reports.
6. **Plan Continuity:** to ensure that current and future drug research needs are effectively addressed, the process of technical strengthening in this area must be continuous and constantly updated. Therefore, it is essential to continue the technical strengthening actions, and for this, periodic evaluations and updates of the human resources training and development plan must be carried out. This ensures that the plan adapts to the changing needs of the country.

It is important to highlight that the technical strengthening of future researchers must be implemented in a comprehensive and sustainable manner over time not only in an occasional or isolated manner. This implies that education and skill development should not be seen as one-off events but as a constantly evolving process that allows researchers to keep up to date with the latest methodologies, techniques and approaches in the field of drug research.

To streamline the process of technical strengthening of human resources in drug research, the National Drugs Observatory (NDO) can carry out various actions:

1. **Collaboration with academic and training institutions:** the NDO can establish alliances and agreements with universities, research centres and other educational institutions to develop and implement training programmes in drug research, and thus promote the inclusion of said contents in the curricula of related careers.
2. **Development of teaching materials and resources:** **the NDO can prepare and disseminate guides, manuals and other training materials that facilitate the learning of research methodologies, techniques and approaches in the field of drugs, contributing to improving the quality and scope of the training offered.**



3. Organisation of courses, workshops and seminars: **the NDO can plan and carry out training activities, such as courses, workshops and seminars, that address relevant and up-to-date topics, allowing participants to develop research skills.**
4. Promotion of networks and collaboration between researchers: **the NDO can promote the creation of networks of researchers, working groups and other collaborative spaces that facilitate the exchange of knowledge, experiences and good practices in drug research, thus generating new learning opportunities.**
5. Evaluation and feedback: **the NDO can carry out periodic evaluations of the impact and relevance of the training actions implemented, and based on the results obtained, adapt and improve the research curriculum to ensure its relevance and usefulness in the national context.**

4.3. Inclusion of drug issues in universities and research institutes

As part of the institutionalisation process of the drug agenda, the NDO can adopt a series of actions that promote the integration of the subject in universities and research institutes. Among the proposed actions, we would particularly highlight the following:

1. **Creation of collaborative research projects:** the NDO can establish collaboration agreements with universities and research institutions at the national level to develop specific research projects related to the drug problem. In this way, the development of drug-related policies and practices will be strengthened, promoting the knowledge generated.
2. **Project financing:** to promote the inclusion of the topic of drugs, it is important that the NDO establish calls for the financing of projects throughout universities and research institutes. These calls and financing mechanisms can be designed from a multi-year perspective to ensure the continuity of research initiatives on the subject of drugs. Each call and financing mechanism can respond to specific needs detected in the field of drug research. It is essential to establish clear and precise evaluation criteria for the projects to be financed to ensure their quality, relevance, and technical and financial feasibility, as well as to guarantee transparency and equity in the selection process.
3. **Adoption of lines of research:** once the research priorities have been identified, the NDO can promote the inclusion of study areas related to the drug problem in universities and research institutes. In this regard, the research vice chancellors of the universities can consider drug research a priority area for the institution, underscoring its scientific and social relevance. It is important to present data, studies and statistics that show the impact of drug use on society, highlighting the need to better investigate and understand this phenomenon.



4. Incentives and recognitions: the NDO can establish incentives and recognition for teachers and students. An effective strategy could be the establishment of prizes and recognitions to highlight outstanding research on drugs, carried out by students, professors and researchers. These awards can increase visibility and interest in the topic, motivating more people to get involved in research in this field. Finally, the NDO can complement economic incentives with non-economic incentives, such as access to relevant information or technical advice for research projects.

4.4. Inclusion of research in the budgets of public and private institutions involved in drug policy

Effective drug research requires sustained resources. This is a challenge that requires strong political commitment and adequate institutional capacity. In this regard, the NDOs can encourage government institutions to allocate budgets to carry out research in this field. It is important that decision-makers include research services or activities in the annual budget planning to achieve an adequate allocation of resources. Budget programming is crucial to ensuring the financial sustainability of the national drug research agenda, and resources must be allocated based on drug policy objectives.

In order to achieve the financial sustainability of a national drug research agenda in the long term, it is necessary to take into account several important aspects. First, it is necessary to create a regulatory framework that guarantees the inclusion of the drug research agenda in government plans and budgets. In this way, it is possible to count on the availability of financial resources for drug research and, thus, obtain quality results that contribute to the development of effective and evidence-based public policies.

It is also necessary to diversify funding sources for drug research to avoid relying on a single funding source. The inclusion of private and public actors interested in the subject, who contribute financial and technical resources, increases the financial sustainability of the agenda and, therefore, its continuity and strengthening. In this regard, it is important to identify different financing options that allow for sustaining a national drug research agenda in the long term. One of the most common options is financing with government funds, either through the national budget or specific research programmes. However, these options may be limited and, in some cases, insufficient to fund all the required research.

Another alternative is private financing, which may involve the collaboration of institutions interested in research on specific topics or that have needs that can be addressed by scientific and technological research. Finally, international cooperation can play a significant role in financing studies. Collaboration between countries and cooperative agreements can provide additional financial and technical resources for national institutions involved in drug research. In addition, international collaboration can foster the sharing of knowledge and good practices in research, which can improve research quality and decision-making.



NDOs could consider the following strategies:

- 1. Raise awareness of the importance of investing in drug research:** the NDO can develop a strategy to highlight the relevance of research on the subject of drugs and create awareness among institutions about the need to allocate resources to these studies.
- 2. Present evidence of return on investment:** the NDO may collect and present data and studies that demonstrate the return on investment in drug research, including social, economic and public health benefits. This evidence can help persuade institutions of the importance of allocating resources for research in this field.
- 3. Establish cooperation agreements:** the observatory can promote agreements with other institutions to allocate a part of their budgets to specific research on drugs. In addition, the NDO could offer specific training and advice for these institutions.
- 4. Generating demand for research:** the NDO can generate demand to finance drug research through the identification of gaps in knowledge and priority areas for research included in the agenda design.
- 5. Identify and promote funding sources:** the observatory can collaborate with institutions to identify funding sources for drug research. In addition, it could establish agreements to conduct research together and share the necessary costs and resources.
- 6. Encourage the participation of researchers in funding processes:** the NDO can offer workshops and training with the aim of providing the necessary tools for developing research projects and requesting funding.
- 7. Collaborate with governmental and non-governmental entities to encourage investment in drugs:** the observatory can collaborate with these entities through joint initiatives that serve as an example of the importance of investing in drug research.

4.5. Form a policy community oriented towards the generation of evidence for the continuous improvement of drug policy

The formation of a network or policy community oriented towards the generation of evidence for the improvement of drug policy implies the interaction between various stakeholders, such as government officials, interest groups, civil society organisations and experts, who work together in a coordinated way to design and implement public policies. According to Sabatier (1988), a political community is defined as a set of actors, people from various organisations, both public and private, who share a series of values and beliefs about a problem and who coordinate their activities and time to achieve their goals. These networks are characterised by a high degree of interdependence and mutual influence, as well as a shared interest in addressing public policy priorities.



In order to apply the concept of policy networks to the development of national drug research agendas, it is essential to maintain close coordination with the different stakeholders that participated in their development. In this regard, the NDO can summon these stakeholders to establish an information and research network that continuously contributes to the development of policies and interventions, fostering collaboration, information exchange, and dialogue among them.

It is important to highlight that this network should have a specific focus on the development of evidence-based drug policies. For this reason, it is essential to establish effective communication channels, such as working groups and discussion forums to exchange information and opinions on issues relevant to drug policy. It is also important to establish coalitions and partnerships among actors to promote common objectives.

The management of the national drug research agenda requires close collaboration and open dialogue among stakeholders to achieve progressive improvement of policies and interventions. Therefore, the formation of networks or policy communities is a useful mechanism for the institutionalisation of the agenda.

Through the management of the NDO, six steps can be implemented to form a community of policies after developing the National Drug Research Agenda:

1. Summon all stakeholders who participated in the development of the agenda and other relevant stakeholders interested in the drug issue, with the aim of presenting the agenda and discussing the importance of establishing a community or network for the generation of knowledge for its effective implementation.
2. Identify the needs and expectations of those involved and encourage dialogue and collaboration between them to establish a shared understanding of the agenda and its importance.
3. Define the roles and responsibilities of each actor in the network, in line with the objectives and goals of the National Drug Research Agenda.
4. Establish clear mechanisms and processes for effective decision-making, coordination and communication among stakeholders in the policy community, in order to ensure effective and sustainable implementation of the agenda.
5. Design and implement a monitoring and evaluation plan that allows the progress and impact of the agenda to be measured, as well as identifying opportunities for improvement and necessary adjustments.
6. Promote transparency and accountability in all stages of implementing the agenda by disclosing all the relevant information and encouraging the active participation of those involved in the policy community.



5. Evaluation: possible indicators of a national drug research agenda

The implementation of a National Drug Research Agenda implies a considerable investment of financial and human resources, so it is essential to have evaluation mechanisms that allow the results obtained to be assessed. These evaluation mechanisms are critical for informed decision-making, as they provide detailed information on implementation achievements and challenges. Based on the results obtained, strategies and actions can be adjusted depending on the objectives established in the agenda itself and therefore management can be improved.

Evaluation is also essential for identifying good practices and opportunities for improving the implementation process of the agenda. This makes it possible to identify the aspects that work well and those that need improvement in order to promote continuous improvement and turn the agenda into a dynamic document that is constantly reviewed, reflecting changes in the environment and the need for evidence. In addition, evaluating the agenda increases the transparency and visibility of the stakeholders and improves how the results obtained are shared.

Indicators that are relevant, reliable and coherent with the objectives of the agenda are needed in order to measure management progress. Once the indicators are defined, a monitoring and evaluation system should be established to collect data and measure progress. It is important to update the indicators periodically to reflect changes in the environment and evidence needs. The results obtained through the indicators must be analysed and used to adjust the strategies and actions of the agenda and to monitor the progress in their implementation.

Below are some examples of indicators that NDOs can consider when managing a national drug research agenda:



Table 10. Examples of indicators for a national drug research agenda

Indicator	Relevance
Proportion of sub-national governments that allocate budget for drug research.	This indicator measures the proportion of sub-national governments that allocate specific financial resources to financing drug-related scientific research. Monitoring this indicator makes it possible to assess the capacity of sub-national governments to contribute to the national drug research agenda.
Number of guides or technical documents generated from national research experiences promoted by the agenda.	This indicator allows the scope of the national research agenda to be evaluated in order to generate and disseminate useful knowledge for the formulation and implementation of public policies. It is also a way of measuring the impact of the agenda for informing and guiding decision-making and political action on the matter.
Number of studies derived from the national research agenda published in indexed journals.	This indicator measures the quality of the research funded by the agenda, since the publication of results in indexed scientific journals is a rigorous peer review process that guarantees the quality of the findings.
Budget allocated to drug research (expressed in national currency).	This indicator seeks to measure the budget allocated to drug research in the country, whether by the government, non-governmental organisations, private companies or other relevant stakeholders. It can also help assess the country's commitment to drug research and its capacity to generate scientific evidence.



Indicator	Relevance
<p>Proportion of research on drugs that integrates the gender and rights based differential perspective.</p>	<p>This indicator makes it possible to assess the degree of inclusion and adoption of relevant approaches in drug research. The inclusion of the gender and rights-based differential perspective in drug research is important in managing more effective and inclusive drug policies. This indicator can help promote research that adequately addresses the needs and realities of various groups, including women, LGBTIQ+ people, indigenous populations, and other marginalised populations.</p>
<p>Number of professionals in the area of drugs that are trained and competent to carry out research.</p>	<p>This indicator is relevant to assessing the country's capacity to use professionals trained in research in the field of drugs. Having a significant number of professionals with research skills would make it possible to strengthen research capacity on the subject of drugs, promote knowledge production and generate quality scientific evidence, as well as improve decision-making processes and the development of policies based on evidence.</p>
<p>Number of universities and specialised institutes that incorporate the topic of drugs into their lines of research.</p>	<p>This indicator makes it possible to evaluate the involvement of universities and institutes specialised in the subject of drugs. In addition, it can promote the training of new trained professionals.</p>



Indicator	Relevance
<p>Number of research programmes that study the economic, social and environmental impact of alternative development projects implemented in drug growing areas.</p>	<p>This indicator is relevant for a National Drug Agenda because alternative development projects are an important strategy for reducing drug cultivation and generating sustainable and legal income alternatives for communities. However, information is needed on the real impact of these projects in different areas, such as economic, social and environmental, in order to evaluate and improve their effectiveness in reducing drug cultivation.</p>
<p>Number of drug research programmes aimed at identifying and controlling the illicit drug market.</p>	<p>Carrying out research in this area allows government authorities to learn about market trends, identify new drugs and substances, monitor trafficking routes and ways of financing the illicit drug market, among other topics.</p>
<p>Number of research programmes on drugs aimed at evaluating the implementation of policies and interventions related to the prevention and treatment of addictions.</p>	<p>This indicator is pertinent because it contributes to the evaluation of the implementation of policies and interventions in prevention and treatment, which is essential to identifying and improving strategies and programmes. Conducting research in this area allows government authorities to identify whether prevention and treatment programmes are effectively achieving their goals and whether interventions are being delivered that are appropriate to the needs of each community. In addition, these studies can promote the design and implementation of innovative programmes based on scientific evidence.</p>



Indicator	Relevance
<p>Number of research programmes that focus on the promotion of gender equity and the inclusion of women in alternative development projects in drug growing areas.</p>	<p>This indicator is relevant because women experience disadvantages due to traditional gender roles and cultural and social barriers. Promoting gender equality and its inclusion in alternative development projects is essential to addressing these inequalities and improving living conditions in these communities. In this regard, research in this field is essential in order to better understand these inequalities and design appropriate strategies to address them.</p>
<p>Number of research programmes on drugs that specifically focus on the experiences and needs of marginalised and vulnerable groups.</p>	<p>The relevance of this indicator lies in its focus on the experiences and needs of marginalised and vulnerable groups, which makes it possible to design and implement more inclusive policies and programmes to address inequalities in the field of drugs. Research in this field is important for the development of strategies that improve the living conditions of these groups, reduce stigmatisation and discrimination, and overcome the barriers that limit their access to mental health and addiction services.</p>



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