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DRUG ABUSE (DRUG ADDICTION), IN PARTICULAR
ITS SOCIO-ECONOMIC ASPECTS

MIDDLE EAST

Note by the Secretary-General

This report is made pursuant to resolution 2 (XVII) of the Commission.^{1/}

^{1/} Official Records of the Economic and Social Council, thirty-fourth session, Supplement No.9, paragraph 137.

UNITED ARAB REPUBLIC

Number of users

It is extremely difficult to arrive at even a rough estimate of the number of cannabis users or addicts in the UAR ^{2/}, owing to lack of information. The Annual Report for 1963 states in this connexion: "We have not as yet exact statistics on addiction and are making every possible effort to perfect a precise and scientific statistical method".

The only indications of the extent of the problem are given by the quantity of cannabis seized, which amounted to 13,000 kg in 1963. Since this only represents a portion of the total destined for consumption, one may assume the drug-using population to be quite large. In fact, very few (16%) of the cannabis users studied in the Hashish in Cairo City report stated that they had discontinued smoking as a result of difficulty in obtaining the drug. This means that a large quantity of cannabis enters the UAR each year in spite of the vigilance of customs and police authorities, and this supply is destined for a considerable number of users.

Type of users

The general characteristics of the drug user are somewhat better known. The aforementioned Cairo City study is the major source for the following remarks.

The typical drug user is a partially-employed industrial labourer or artisan, at the bottom of the economic and social scale, living in an urban area. His usual practice is to meet with a small group of four to six acquaintances to talk and smoke in the evening. The over-whelming majority of those studied (97 per cent), smoked only in the evening, which seems to indicate that most of them probably worked or sought work during the day.

Family influences are important as two thirds of those who began using drugs before they were eighteen had lost their parents. This is particularly relevant as drug abuse begins early in most cases.

^{2/} According to law 182 of 1960, an addict is defined as "one who habitually surrenders himself to the use of drugs".

Social, economic, cultural and historical factors

In the case of the UAR it seems obvious that unemployment and low economic status are the most striking characteristics of drug users. The constant references to the pleasures derived from social groupings, where in addition to smoking cannabis there is friendly conversation about sex, work, social and family affairs, cannot be under-estimated. This is further confirmed by the fact that most users also mention taking cannabis in connexion with weddings and other social celebrations. These people, on the fringe of economic and social life (many of them recent migrants from the country to the city), are at least able to identify themselves with the group taking cannabis. Euphoria, curiosity and acting like "real men" are frequently given as additional reasons for beginning the habit. This is further emphasized by the fact that a significant proportion of users studied gave their desire to conform with other users as their reason for going back to the habit after having stopped. It seems obvious that cannabis use presents both a negative aspects, which involves evading unpleasant reality in the form of economic and family problems, and the positive aspect of social intercourse.

Historical and sociological material have stressed the important role accorded by tradition to cannabis as an aphrodisiac. Consequently, even when users do not mention this as a primary reason for taking the drug it may, nevertheless, play a much larger role than their statements would indicate.

As regards the relation of cannabis use to religious belief, official sources and the highest religious authorities hold that Islam prohibits the use of all drugs including cannabis. Nevertheless, attention has been drawn by all authors dealing with the subject to the fact that many cannabis users misunderstand this and a body of folklore exists associating cannabis use with heightened religious experience. One conclusion might be that although this is not a question of formal religious practice, it nevertheless represents a custom in some religious groups.

Psychological or personality factors

It is not surprising that more cannabis users than non-users come from disrupted families with a particularly high ratio of inter-parental conflicts, separation and divorce. The importance of the father and of his example is shown by the fact that 58 per cent of drug users had been aware of the fact that their fathers used cannabis, whereas only 20 per cent of the control group of non-users reported such information.

It would seem that in spite of rigorous police measures, the drug remains relatively accessible, but this in itself is perhaps less important than the need for potential users to incorporate themselves into a friendly group of individuals in the same situation.

Psychological, physiological and social effects

Authors vary widely in their assessment of the effects of cannabis addiction. Earlier accounts have gone so far as to describe it as a plague or national calamity without, however, providing precise information and references to support these judgments. It has been often cited as a cause of diminishing productivity, broken family ties, and shiftless behaviour. It has also been frequently assigned a role in homosexual behaviour. However, as has been mentioned, little careful or concrete work has been undertaken so far to clarify or support these general statements. Similarly, it has not been possible to ascertain in the UAR to what extent cannabis consumption is related to crime, other than violations of anti-narcotics and smuggling laws. References to assault or aggressive behaviour indicate that these are usually directed against members of the users' families. The reports available show that a careful distinction must be made between cannabis as a direct cause of crime and its use as a symptom of delinquent attitudes.

Treatment and rehabilitation

Rehabilitation in the UAR concentrates on opium addicts, and uses the facilities of the mental hospital of Khanka, and a special medical pavilion of the central prison. Cannabis users by and large are excluded from this programme.

While it is well known that cannabis does not produce the physiological dependency of opium, it remains true that some sort of rehabilitation programme is necessary for the habitual smokers. Food, employment and the provision of some recreational activities would seem to be the most urgent remedies for the former addict. They might give him a higher sense of his personal dignity and would go a long way toward integrating him into his society. It was emphasized that the cannabis habit in the UAR will be broken to the extent that programmes of economic and social development begin to have an impact on drifting and listless urban hangers-on. It is in any case of primary importance to see to it that cured cannabis addicts do not "transfer" to another substance, which may be more noxious.

As in other countries, there is room for improvement in the rehabilitation facilities. In addition, it seems that a new approach based on attacking the psychological and sociological roots of the problem would be more rewarding. Police and enforcement officials should be aware of the origins of the problem and of the techniques that have been devised for dealing with it in other countries.

Enforcement measures

The severity of punishment for drug abuse and trafficking in the UAR is striking. In 1963, it was reported that there were 6,216 traffickers and 1,802 cannabis users in jail. Since the majority of traffickers also took cannabis, this represents a large number of users in prison, against the 25 addicts under treatment in the Khanka hospital. Since its foundation, the hospital reports only 248 addicts cured. Voluntary admission for cure to the hospital is restricted by the fact that release can only be obtained upon a favourable recommendation from the responsible authority.

Under the regulations in force at Khanka, in 1964, a user cannot present himself for treatment more than twice in his lifetime, nor may he return for treatment within five years of his original stay, whereas most addicts the world over are recidivists and often relapse several times before being cured. Furthermore, therapy often stabilizes addiction but does not definitely cure it.

Stern police measures, heavy sentences and the existing facilities for therapy have not yet proved to be a complete success. Sentences in 1955 were so severe that the present trend toward lighter punishment seems to be a reaction to them, although no change in policy has been reported to the Secretary-General. In 1954 Cairo courts sentenced more frequently cannabis traffickers to life imprisonment than to any other term. In the frontier courts that year, out of a total of 75 convictions, 51 were for life imprisonment ^{3/}. However, in 1963 throughout the UAR only 9 life sentences were imposed for the same offence and the average length of imprisonment was about two years. Incarceration places a burden on prisons, social welfare services and the community as a whole. Yet the number of accused persons continues to rise each year. It has gone from 6,396 in 1960 to 7,641 in 1963 ^{4/}.

^{3/} E/CN.7/286/Add.16, p.15.

^{4/} UAR annual report, E/CN.7/R.14/Add.35, p.7.

Furthermore, the heavy traffic in cannabis continues, as is shown by the new high level of seizures, which amounted to 13,037 kg in 1963. The present situation is one in which the illicit traffic continues to be significant and enforcement officers risk their lives, while the State bears a heavy load of expense. The number of addicts remains the highest in the North African and Near East areas and shows little sign of diminishing. A careful study of the social and economic causes of addiction might suggest new methods for dealing with them, particularly of a preventive nature. As the period of early youth has been shown to be crucial, a programme involving teenagers and young persons and attempting to prevent their acquisition of a drug habit might be a profitable course of action. Some of the problems to be solved are, for instance, a study of the possible remedies to the boredom and frustration which the addicts try to escape; a more thorough study into their motives: lack of money, opportunity or social acceptance; and the possibilities of training in view of improving their chances of employment.

JORDAN

According to the information available, whatever drug addiction there may be in Jordan does not constitute an economic or a social problem.

IRAQ

Iraq is not a producer of narcotic substances and has only a slight problem of addiction. It is unique in the area in that the addiction it reports primarily involves opium rather than hashish. Information is very limited and small numbers of addicts are mentioned in the reports on the incidence of addiction. There is no registration of opium users in Iraq. Offenders charged by the police authorities in 1963, for example, numbered 123, against an estimate of 66 addicts made in 1960. There is no provision for the compulsory treatment of addicts, nor are there any state institutions specially charged with dealing with the problem of addiction.

On the basis of information made available by the Government of Iraq, it would seem that the problem of addiction is not considered to be of any social or economic significance.

SYRIA

The Syrian Arab Republic lists only a small number of addicts, most of whom use hashish. In 1963 the annual report showed a total of 328 registered addicts, of whom 324 used hashish and four opium. Most of them were between 20 and 34 years of age. According to official estimates, the actual number of addicts might be five times higher.

The Government of Syria does not seem to feel that the small number of addicts represents a major social or economic problem. It is more concerned with stopping the illicit transit traffic which is heavy in the region.