



# National Report on New Psychoactive Substances Expert Interviews in Portugal

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## 1 Description of respondents

This report presents the insights gained on New Psychoactive Substances (NPS) in Portugal from our interviews with eight experts of prevention in Portugal, four women and four men. They were selected taking into account their work and location in order to collect a diverse overview of opinions, practices, and ways of working with the NPS subject.

We present the testimonials of the following professionals:

Maria Carmo Carvalho, 39 years old, is a PhD in psychology, a professor at Universidade Católica do Porto, and the coordinator of the Kosmicare project, which provides harm reduction services and intervention in psychedelic crises.

Daniel Martins, 29 years old, Master in Chemist, is a researcher in the NPS field for the last year at the Sciences University of Porto, and is responsible for the drug-checking initiative implemented by the Piaget Association for the Development (APDES) and for “The Global Drug Survey” in Portugal.

João Santa Maria, 45 years old, with basic education, is now a peer educator for the Group of Activists for Treatment (GAT) and has worked for four years as a mediator and as a screenings technician in the drugs field after recovering from injecting drug use for over thirteen years of his life.

Cristiana Pires, 32 years old, graduated in psychology, is a PhD student and worked at APDES as the project coordinator for the BAO NPS Project, Local Pass, NPS in Europe, ALLCool, Safe!n and Check!n Projects. She has worked in this field for the last seven years.

Raúl Melo, 53 years old, Master in Psychology, works as a clinical psychologist and is a superior technician in prevention at the governmental institute for drugs and addictions in Portugal, General Directorate for Intervention on Addictive Behaviours and Dependencies in SICAD since 1987 (the last 29 years).

Filipa Soledade, 39 years old, graduated in Communication and has worked as a drug technician and coordinator for the prevention service at the Leiria Integrated Responses Centre since 2001 (15 years of experience) focusing on prevention and harm reduction among school groups.

Nelson Carvalho, 45 years old, is a psychologist, ex-politician, and the current Director of the Regional Prevention Service of Drug Addictions in Madeira island. He has been working in drug field for the last fifteen years.

Suzete Frias, 51 years old, is a psychologist and the project coordinator of the Regional Association for Rehabilitation and Social Reintegration in the Azores (ARRISCA), where she has worked from the beginning of her career. She presents a total of 24 years of experience in drugs field – as a project coordinator, intervention technician, and clinical psychologist.

## 2 Description of the work fields

We will start by presenting the institutions and their work field.

The Regional Association for Rehabilitation and Social Reintegration in the Azores (APDES) is a non-profit NGDO (non-governmental development organization) founded in 2004 that promotes integrated devel-

opment. Its main goal is intervention among vulnerable communities and people in order to improve their access to healthcare services, employment, and education. APDES works in four lines of intervention: health; harm reduction and human rights; health education; social cohesion and employment; and cooperation and development. All tasks carried out by them follow successfully delineated work principles such as research, participative methodologies, outreach intervention, advocacy, assessment, and interdisciplinary approach, with special emphasis in the drug field with their initiative Check!n, the only drug-testing project available in Portugal.

The Directorate for Intervention on Addictive Behaviours and Dependencies (SICAD) is the governmental institute for drugs and addictions that has the mission of promoting the reduction of use of psychoactive substances, the prevention of addictive behaviours, and the decreasing of dependencies in Portugal. SICAD is the central body of the Ministry of Health and is integrated in the direct administration of the state. Through the creation of the national strategy for reducing the use of substances, prevention of addictive behaviours, and reduction of dependencies and their evaluation, SICAD supports the government body responsible for the health area. SICAD defends their organizational values of humanism and pragmatism, the centrality in the citizen, integration of intervention and responses, territorially, quality and innovation. In terms of activities, the interventions run by SICAD are divided into five main actions: prevention, harm reduction, treatment, rehabilitation, dissuasion, and prevention materials and campaigns.

In addition to APDES and SICAD, represented in our interviews by four of the eight respondents, six other institutions or projects were taken in account, including those from the autonomous regions of Madeira and Azores.

The Kosmicare project is one of the most popular and unique initiatives related to harm reduction and intervention in psychedelic crises during some festivals in Portugal. The Boom Festival has been held in Portugal since 1997, and developed the Kosmicare project in 2002 following Portugal's 2001 decriminalization law. Last year was the first edition of the Be-in Gathering 2015, another festival produced by the same company as the Boom Festival. Since 2008, Maria Carmo Carvalho, one of our respondents, became responsible of this initiative. There have been two phases of harm reduction and risk minimization at Boom Festival. The first ran from 2002 to 2008, and focused on drug use at the festival itself. The second phase, which began in 2010, focuses not only on intervention at the festival, but also with scientific research, experimentation, and validation of harm reduction methods. In 2010, Boom Festival signed a unique protocol that involved the Portuguese Ministry of Health through the Institute for Drugs and Drug Addiction (IDT) (now SICAD), and the Catholic University of Porto, where Maria Carmo teaches. The protocol's aims were to improve intervention at the festival by maximizing resources and liaise more effectively with offsite health services. Kosmicare now has a team of around forty people (psychiatrists, therapists, psychologists, homeopaths, therapists, and volunteers) working at the festival site in a central area with tipis, yurts, and a seating area. It has a drug testing service nearby one of the music areas where festival attendees can learn about the substances they have used or are considering using through a partnership with the APDES organization. The project also works in collaboration with the festival's in-house medical services (doctors, medics, and nurses), with offsite health services (hospitals or health centres in the region), and security stewards.

The Group of Activists for Treatment (GAT), founded in 2001, is a non-profit organization with an individual membership structure and founded on the cooperation between people from different communities and organizations affected by HIV and AIDS. Providing services such as social support, a community advisory board, conferences, a centre against discrimination, an information and documentation centre, a needle exchange and distribution of drug use material, and also a place to do free HIV tests, GAT deserves special mention here regarding its action among drug users. *IN-Mouraria* is one of GAT's projects, represented in our interviews by João Santa Maria. *IN-Mouraria* is a centre developed taking into account field work and experience among drug users and the reality about drug street selling.

The Regional Prevention Service of Drug Addiction in Madeira, the current Intervention Operating Unit in Behaviour Additions and Dependencies (UCAD), is the public service of the Management Institute of Health and Social Affairs on the island of Madeira and is responsible for the streamlining of activities to prevent and reduce the consumption of licit and illicit drugs there. In terms of intervention, UCAD activities are focused on the following areas: intervention through social media, educational contexts, families, employment contexts, recreational settings, sports, and community settings. Nelson Carvalho referred to prevention as one of the priorities of service, as well as the care of users, and effective referral of users to other structures.

The Regional Association for Rehabilitation and Social Reintegration in the Azores (ARRISCA), represented by Suzete Frias, is a non-profit organization with the mission of the promotion of reduction of drug use; the prevention of addictions and use reduction; the promotion of mental health and prevention of risk behaviour in the wider community; the rehabilitation and personal, family and cultural integration problems of social exclusion in children or adolescents, youth and adults; as well as the improvement in scientific, cultural, technical, organizational, ethical and human practice in psychosocial rehabilitation and socio-cultural integration. The institution follows the humanistic model of centrality in the person, territoriality, integrated intervention, proximity, and cooperation. ARRISCA is recognized by the Portuguese government as the regional public service responsible for drug related issues in the Azores and the institution acts in all municipalities of the region, with around 53 employees spread over partner organizations. It is important to point out that the Azores are composed by nine different islands, all under the same rules. In terms of interventions, the organization started to work in an outpatient setting system of treatment, extending later to appointments, psychotherapeutic groups, day care centres, transition apartments, productive spaces and workshops/ateliers for drug users.

Regarding prevention, the *Expressa-Te* project was created by a team of social workers and monitored by Professor Fernando Mendes from the University of Coimbra. Interventions take place in school settings, neighbourhoods, as well as in recreational settings based both on proximity and on informal consultation with residents.

In regards to the time dedicated to the NPS subject, our respondents reported spending around 21% of their time working with NPS related issues. This average increases considerably in Daniel Martin's case (50% dedicated to NPS and 50% to conventional drugs). Before the Decree-Law No. 54/2013 of 17th April, this average was higher.

## 2.1 Work related with NPS

Even if the description of the institutions and their activities had not been presented, defined, and detailed by the respondents in the interviews, it is possible to understand how these institutions and their work could be related to NPS according to the main principles of each organization. However, we have concluded that the work related to NPS is scarce at the present time, based on the lack of information, knowledge, absence of a proper NPS definition, and the main insights gained from the interviews.

According to all respondents, the emergence of smart shops in Portugal was significant for all organizations between 2007 and 2013; after the smartshops closed, it started to be different through each region and target-group of each organization.

With the exception of the work that has been developed by APDES, with the drug-testing initiative and some information and harm reduction materials, such as flyers, conferences and research into NPS, it is important to emphasize the work developed by the other institutions and projects rarely focused on the NPS subject. Institutions from Madeira and the Azores provide another exception, seemingly related to the fact that these regions experience the phenomenon in different ways due to the regional prevalence and culture of consumption as well as the prices of substances which are often much more expensive than in continental Portugal. According to Nelson Carvalho, substances in Madeira can be five times more expensive than in the continent: "If in continental Portugal we can get cocaine for 50 euros, here we get it for 80 or 100 euros.... It's not so easy and that's why the NPS phenomenon is different here".

The location of each region seems to determine trends in NPS consumption. For example, the proximity to other cultures may influence the types of substances consumed, such as with the relation between Azores, Canada and United States. Azores has a huge and old history of emigration, and according to Suzete Frias's statements, the drug problem seems to be related and affected by migratory flows that seems to bring new trends from other countries and cultures, such as the use of synthetic cannabinoids and cathinones, which seems to be more popular among Canada and the United States.

Even Kosmicare, based on the description of their work field and Maria Carmo Carvalho's statements, never included or identified any specific work related to NPS despite the close work they have done with people who use drugs. However, and as agreed by almost all other respondents, the adulteration of substances seems to be the major problem related with NPS, and has allowed their continued expansion in the market. The distinction between intentional and non-intentional consumption of NPS seems to be an important consideration for Filipa Soledade and João Santa Maria, who said that their work related specifically to NPS use is almost none, as the consumers of these substances don't intend to use NPS, but use conventional drugs, such as cocaine, heroin, LSD, or MDMA.

Raúl Melo and Nelson Carvalho essentially work indirectly with drug users, but are responsible for prevention activities in continental Portugal and the Madeira islands, and as a result, are both well informed about the current situation of NPS in Portugal.

## 3 NPS definitions within organizations and respondents

As was described previously, there is no consensus on a definition for NPS among the experts interviewed. However, we can note that most of them tend to follow regulatory definitions rather than scien-

tific ones, not only because of the lack of scientific data about NPS, but also because of the current guidelines provided by the Portuguese focal point and other recognized international definitions from the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA) or the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC).

Each institution included in our sample follows their own definition of NPS. SICAD defines it as “a new narcotic drug or a new psychotropic drug in pure or in a preparation that is not controlled by the Single Convention of United Nations 1961 or 1971 on Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances respectively, but that may pose a threat to public health comparable to the substances listed in these conventions”. According to the definitions given by the experts from SICAD, Raúl Melo defined NPS as “synthetic substances that are produced to mimic, be similar to, or potentiate the effects of the conventional drugs”, while Filipa Soledade describes NPS as “substances, synthetic or not, that are not identified and regulated yet and are emerging in a more or less formal way which can be easier in terms of access regarding the adding of its on-line availability”.

Cristiana Pires and Daniel Martins, both representing APDES and both involved in the development of research in this field, are also guided by a regulatory definition of NPS. For Cristiana Pires, NPS “have several definitions.... There are definitions which only consider NPS as substances that have emerged recently...There are others which consider NPS as research chemicals, i.e. substances that were synthesized during the 60s and 70s.... My favorite one, and from my point of view, the definition that make more sense for me, are NPS are substances that appeared recently into the market and began to be consumed recreationally...those that are now available in the markets but with less experience in terms of consumption.... At the same time, ‘the new consumption of old substances’”. In Daniel Martins’ opinion, as a researcher in this field, the most relevant definition is still the regulatory from the EMCDDA. João Santa Maria, speaking from his experiences with marginalized users and emigrants with GAT, follows the definition suggested by APDES, which is formally regulatory.

Though respondents generally adopted the regulatory definition, there were some exceptions. For example, Maria Carmo Carvalho from the Kosmicare project believed that regulatory definitions are less important in the context of Portugal’s decriminalization model. For Nelson Carvalho, even working with both types of definitions, the scientific definitions are much more important for him, especially because the institution he represents in Madeira works with this definition in its collaboration with the University of Coimbra. Suzete Frias from Azores reported that the regulatory definition from SICAD is the one that her association has followed formally from the beginning; even with considering NPS phenomenon as a “cat and mouse game”.

## 4 Description of NPS use and users

Distinguishing between intentional and non-intentional consumption is one of the biggest challenges for determining who the consumers are and which NPS are the most consumed in Portugal.

Few experts were able to talk deeply about the prevalence of consumption of NPS in Portugal in the last three years following the closure of smartshops in 2013. Only Cristiana Pires and Daniel Martins from APDES, and Suzete Frias and Nelson Carvalho from Azores and Madeira respectively, were able to provide insight on this subject. Their knowledge gives us different inputs in terms of information sources, but that

must be understood taking into account their own institutions and work that has been being developed by them in the last years.

Cristiana Pires and Daniel Martins are part of one of the main organizations working specifically with NPS related issues, and their drug testing project Check!n as well as their scientific research focused on NPS (eg. Global Drug Survey, BAO NPS, NPS in Europe, Local Pass) were considered truly important for this report. According to their statements, NPS users seems to be anyone in terms of appearance, but most are non-intentional consumers. However, there is an additional niche of intentional consumers with a very specific profile.

Intentional users of NPS seems to be individuals who are looking for particular substances, such as 2C-B drugs, Sálvia, or MXE; or those who can be considered here as “virtual users”. Normally, these types of consumers have strong knowledge about drugs and, according to Cristiana Pires, seem to be “very well informed about drug policies and about accurate methodologies of consumption”.

However, the majority of NPS users are unintentional consumers, and according to Daniel Martins, responsible for the Check!n project, these consumers are “regular users of drugs in general” who were misled somehow. For example, nowadays it is frequent to find NBOMe-x instead of LSD. On the other hand, in the case of 2C-B, it is becoming trendy in recreational settings on its own, and the consumption can be intentional and repeated.

Regarding the information given by the organizations from the islands, Azores and Madeira, we can point some specific and evidence-based data about the users in those regions. Suzete Frias and Nelson Carvalho, from their respective organizations and work field experiences, suggested that NPS consumers seems to be over 30 years old, male, and represent diverse reasons for consumption such as shortages of tradition drugs, trends brought from emigration, prices, and adulteration.

In the Azores, the consumption trend appears to essentially be a novel experience for those within the school aged population, but a problem for those who are a part of a therapeutic program or treatment. Synthetic cannabinoids, synthetic opioids, and cathinones seem to be the most consumed NPS in the region.

In Madeira, Nelson Carvalho told us that before Decree-Law No. 28/2012/M outlawed and closed all smartshops in the island, the average age of NPS age users was around 25 years old or minor aged, and consumption had increased considerably in 2013. In terms of profiles, most of these individuals are unemployed and with lower levels of education. The drug market availability (or unavailability) is a very important factor in terms of reasons for the NPS consumption, especially due to the shortages of some drugs such as heroin or cocaine.

All interviewed experts mentioned that most of users use NPS in combination with conventional drugs such as cannabis. Recreational settings seem to be the most related setting of NPS use, with the exception of the islands, where “marginalized users” are also considered to be a significant group of NPS users.

## 4.1 NPS related problems

Current NPS consumption patterns and markets in combination with the low levels of knowledge of toxicity and prevalence of use and limitations of the decriminalization model, created a legal framework that somehow lead to an uncontrolled drug market beginning with the proliferation of smartshops.

When compared to other illicit and conventional drugs, the NPS phenomenon stands out because of their impact in consumption rates, and the effects and negative consequences associated with continued unintended use (adulteration). According to Raúl Melo, NPS are problem due to the novelty of trends and cultures of consumption. The primary goal of NPS seems to be the effects of taking a the drug, “a mean to achieve an end”, in contrast to the consumption culture of the last fifty years where taking conventional illicit drugs was considered to be “a way of being”.

From João Santa Maria’s point of view, the main problem of NPS when compared to other illicit drugs is the creation of new opportunities for the drug market, where conventional drugs are becoming more expensive, less pure, or simply adulterated. However, while the majority of experts mentioned the danger associated with these new markets and trends to be the biggest problem with NPS, Daniel Martins considered the online market to be less dangerous than the black or illegal market where everyone faces everyone.

In general, for those experts whose work is related to mental health, the focus is on the mid-long term health effects, such as liver and kidneys problems (most related with synthetic cannabinoids), paranoia, and other psychiatric consequences. For those who are working in the field of harm reduction, the main challenge is to understand how to avoid short-term consequences associated with NPS use such as bad trips, police or dealer conflicts. It is easy to notice differences between each expert and their work field. However, violent behaviour is often associated and identified as a NPS effect.

## 5 NPS market

The NPS market in Portugal can be divided into two distinct periods of time: before the closure of all smartshops in Portugal, from February 2007 until April 2013; and after, from April 2013 until now. Before Decree-Law No. 54/2013 of 17th April, NPS sale was made openly through specific physical and online shops spread over the country. After implementation of the law, the NPS trade circle at the national level ended, as over 159 new drugs were outlawed and approximately sixty smartshops operating in Portugal until that moment were closed.

According to many of the respondents, the geographical location of Portugal is one of the major reasons for the ease of access and availability of all substances in the country. Additional factors appear to influence the islands of Azores and Madeira, making these regions distinct from the rest of Portugal. In continental Portugal, nearly all substances can be purchased on the street, but some cases, especially specific substances such as salvia or other products which require their own preparations, are mainly purchased online.

Raúl Melo reported that he has noticed in his work field some grow shops have continued to sell some types of NPS through offline ways, however, he was not able to provide confirmation in terms of data. Maria Carmo Carvalho, from her experience at the Boom Festival, stated that the majority of consumers

bring NPS from outside, but it's also possible to purchase it into the festival if necessary, pointing to this as the biggest concern due to the possibility of adulteration.

Regarding Madeira and Azores, the culture of consumption and purchasing seem to be different. Unlike continental Portugal, communication exchange occurs between the police and the institutions related to drug issues in the islands. According to Nelson Carvalho substances are generally purchased in the street, and therefore their entrance to the island seems to be essentially by post offices, suggesting a greater development of online marketplaces. The same happens in Azores, but with the additional particularity of migration flows in the region, which seems to have a significant influence on new trends, consumption, and availability of substances.

## 6 Prevention and harm reduction

The definitions for prevention and harm reduction given by respondents were mixed, and sometimes placed in the same level of intervention. However, some respondents made a distinction between prevention and harm reduction, especially for those whose work field was directly related with one of the two areas.

Prevention can be defined as the set of actions taken to provide education and increase awareness of at-risk populations about the vulnerability of developing a determined risk behaviour. Targeted interventions are developed with the intention of minimizing the negative impact of the designated risk or delaying its occurrence.

From Nelson Carvalho's point of view, prevention is also about providing competences using the ecological model: the individual, his family, and his environment. Suzete Frias from Azores, also mentioned the benefits of work done at the emotional level and increasing an individual's internal skills.

Filipa Soledade, from Leiria Integrated Responses Centre, believes that prevention must be understood and implemented as a community approach rather than at the level of the individual. For her, prevention must be taken at a global and anticipated level, always before the risk exposure.

For João Santa Maria, prevention seems to be much more related with the availability of information and direct health and social responses for the consumers, regardless of whether the individual uses NPS or traditional drugs.

In general, respondents agreed that good prevention measures are the ones that delay or prevent the abuse of or even contact with the substances.

In terms of a definition of harm reduction, Cristiana Pires, Daniel Martins, and Maria Carmo Carvalho were able to describe the concept in the simplest way, giving real examples of what has been done in the last few years in Portugal. For them, harm reduction is what prevents or avoids all negative consequences associated with consumption, even already among people who are already using drugs. All eight respondents mentioned the successful strategies used by the drug-testing project CheckIn, such as the sharing of materials for drug use (syringes exchange, sniff kits, etc.) and information flyers on drugs and the dangers related to adulteration; work which has been developed in the last years by APDES.

It should be emphasized out of all the respondents, representing a total of six institutions with different work files, no one was able to identify any prevention or harm reduction strategies focused exclusively on the NPS phenomenon. APDES was the institution with the best responses to the subject. When asked about the lack of NPS specific interventions, Maria Carmo Carvalho remarked, “I’m aware of but I’m pretty sure there aren’t any and we’re still far away from having them. It’s still necessary to make a proper profile on the users.... Still in 2012, when there were smartshops, some work was done by the media and through informational flyers”. Respondents tended to answer this question by saying that nowadays, every project include the NPS has drugs, distinguishing only traditional from new drugs.

While there is not yet a formal classification system for NPS, Madeira and the Azores have developed a system to catalogue each NPS into their respective substances class. Due to the integrated work with the police, and in Madeira’s case with the work developed by the University of Coimbra, NPS can be classified as hallucinogens, stimulants, depressives, or cannabinoids. The other classification method separates NPS by chemical category, such as the piperazines and the cathinones, but is less developed in terms of scientific data and facts.

Regarding the main difficulties and limitations for NPS prevention and harm reduction activities, two significant issues were identified by respondents. First is the ongoing issue of the current lack of knowledge and data on NPS consumption; and second, almost all respondents mentioned that the team of professionals work as volunteers as a consequence of the absence of designated and adequate funding needed for quality work. Respondents recommended increased investment in prevention among users and their families in diverse intervention contexts, as well as continuous financial support for projects doing work in this domain.

## 7 Current drug policy and legal status of NPS

As mentioned above, there was a profound difference between when smartshops were open to the public, and when the Decree-Law No. 54/2013 of 17th April was implemented by the Portuguese government in 2013 to close them. All respondents agreed that the closure of the smartshops has substantially reduced the main problems related with NPS consumption, including the prevalence of NPS use, negative health consequences, severe cases associated with consumption, and of course the availability of NPS. The significant impact from closing smartshops seems to indicate the legal status is an important factor associated with NPS consumption rates for the minor aged and for any user who wants to avoid contact with drug dealers.

Although smartshops closed both on the islands and the Portuguese mainland, nearly all respondents tended to provide an explanation related to the decriminalization model and its failures and limitations, such as the uncontrolled drug market. João Santa Maria, peer educator from GAT, also mentioned issues related to the absence of consumption rooms, which are not possible under the decriminalization law.

Nelson Carvalho advised that the differences in consumptions culture, prices, and availability of conventional drugs such as cocaine or heroin on the islands, highlights the importance of creating new measures to control and criminalize the commerce of NPS, especially for these distinct Portuguese regions. Nelson Carvalho is currently in the process of preparing a law with the regional parliament which would properly sanction NPS trafficking in the region. In his opinion, NPS have to be criminalized since the measures cre-

ated by the EU are currently ineffective and slow, and EU law makers “should be more agile as it’s proven that NPS are more harmful than the traditional drugs”.

The greatest danger posed by NPS to health and to the current drug policies is essentially the fact that these substances have not been well studied and identified in terms of their mechanisms of action in the body, physical form, consumption forms, testing, and classification. The lack of knowledge, both of the consumers and professionals, is considered as a serious problem and limitation to effectively addressing NPS related issues in Portugal.

## 8 NPS prevention: some insights

Despite the closure of NPS physical selling points in 2013, the decreasing on number of cases associated with NPS consumption in Portugal, and the end of the controversy about this phenomenon, the NPS market seems to be continuing, but with new particularities: the distinction between intentional and unintentional consumers, and an increasing association with problematic drug use rather than recreational use.

However, trends in NPS consumption appear to be less clear when we also take into consideration the islands of Madeira and the Azores. On the islands, reasons for NPS consumption seem to be related to the shortage of traditional drugs such as heroin and cocaine, the prices, as well as new trends brought from other cultures, suggesting further new developments in NPS trends in the future.

Though most respondents were similar in that they follow regulatory definitions of NPS rather than scientific ones, definitions may vary from one organization to another, from region to region, and from context to context. This diversity suggests new research questions developed should focus on the factors unique to each reality and context be formulated in coordination with the representative organization on each region or mission area.