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News Agency

# Portugal's Innovative Drug Policy Offers Hope\*

By [Mario Queiroz](#)

**LISBON, Aug 1 2012 (IPS)** - Portugal was traditionally one of the European countries with the lowest levels of drug use, until the 1980s and 1990s, when problematic drug abuse, especially of heroin, became a major problem.

A law adopted in 2001 by this conservative Catholic country abolished all criminal penalties for the personal use and possession of drugs, and managed to reduce drug abuse, while removing a barrier that kept addicts from seeking treatment: fear of being reported to the police.

The prevalence of heroin use in the 16 to 18 year age group fell from 2.5 percent in 1999 to 1.8 percent in 2005, according to the study "Drug Decriminalization in Portugal; Lessons for Creating Fair and Successful Drug Policies", published by the Cato Institute, a Washington-based think tank, in 2009.

And the overall prevalence of drug use in the 15 to 19 year category dropped from 10.8 percent to 8.6 percent between 2001 and 2007, according to a major survey.

But the decriminalisation of drug use is just part of a broader set of policies, aimed at reducing both supply and demand, and including measures of prevention, treatment, harm reduction and social reinsertion, Dr. João Castel-Branco Goulão, the architect of the reform of Portugal's drug policy and the president of the country's [Institute on Drugs and Drug Addiction](#), told IPS.

Perhaps the biggest stride forward was in the area of drug addiction-related damage, like the spread of HIV/AIDS.

In 2000, contagion among intravenous drug users accounted for 52 percent of all new cases of HIV. By 2009, that proportion had plunged to 16 percent.

This result was largely due to harm reduction measures, such as the distribution to heroin users of kits containing a needle and syringe, rubbing alcohol, and a condom, in exchange for used syringes.

“Portugal has given the world a powerful example of how a national drug policy can work to everyone’s benefit,” Kasia Malinowska-Sempruch, director of the Open Society Institute’s Global Drug Policy programme, wrote in the foreword to a study published in June 2011, which points to the same downward trend in drug use.

The results of a wider study on drug use in the general population will be released in November, said Goulão.

The reform did not legalise consumption, but decriminalised possession of small amounts of illicit drugs – defined as what is needed for 10 days of personal use – which is not punishable by prison, and does not generate a police record.

Instead, those caught for possession and use of drugs ranging from marijuana to heroin or LSD are brought before three-person administrative panels known as ‘committees to dissuade drug addiction’, made up of lawyers, judges and health care or social services workers, which decide whether to recommend treatment, a small fine, or no penalty, based on a health perspective.

Dealers and traffickers are still arrested and jailed.

“Punitive measures on their own, no matter how harsh, cannot bring down consumption,” former Brazilian president Fernando Henrique Cardoso (1995-2003) said on a 2011 visit to Lisbon as chair of the Global Commission on Drug Policy.

The road taken by Portugal is praiseworthy because of its innovative nature, its scope, and the coherence of the national policy in a country with a deeply-rooted conservative tradition, he added.

Portugal had begun to be held up as an example two years earlier, when the Cato Institute described its decriminalisation policy as “a resounding success.”

The world has been seeking alternatives to the failed war on drugs, whose objectives were reflected in the first international instrument in the area, the Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs, adopted in 1961.

In Portugal, once the fear of being prosecuted for possession of drugs was removed, thousands of people, especially the young, began to turn to the network of treatment centres – public or private – created in the framework of the legal reform.

### **Lost hopes**

Drug addicts can still be seen roaming around Bairro Alto, the Bohemian centre of Lisbon's night life, and Casal Ventoso, the biggest open-air market for drugs in all of Europe a decade ago. And the economic crisis shaking the country could once again swell their ranks.

Two addicts in their late 30s agreed to talk to IPS about their experiences, on the condition that they would not be identified or photographed.

“Carlos”, a car mechanic, had quit using cocaine over a decade ago. “But a year ago, when the garage cut staff because of the crisis, I was the first one laid off, which is the same thing that happened to several old fellow travellers who had gone through rehabilitation.

“We are on the front line when it comes to being fired,” he said.

With his life collapsing around him, “I started to sink into darkness; I didn't want to see or talk to anybody, and I couldn't sleep at night, and had nightmares. I stuck it out for less than two months before I returned to Casal Ventoso.

“I have spent almost all of my unemployment subsidy on drugs, ignoring what could happen to me in the future. How could things get worse? Only if I lose my life, because I've already lost the rest: friends, home, family, and if the unemployment subsidy runs out, money as well,” he said.

Agostinho, who agreed to give his first name, is an old friend of Carlos, who he had last seen eight years ago “because he didn't want to hang out with bad company,” he joked with a broad smile, pointing a finger at his friend.

“I started methadone treatment 10 years ago, but after six months it wasn’t working, and I had no other choice than to keep living this life,” he said.

He said he consumes “anything I can get for a good price,” and survives on the tips he is given by drivers who he helps find a parking spot in the centre of congested Lisbon.

Although the law does not enable the police to arrest drug addicts, “they continue to mistreat us, because in their eyes, the ‘parking helpers’ are drug addicts, and hence dangerous criminals.”

But the statistics show that the number of robberies and muggings committed by drug users has not risen. On the contrary, the rates of several kinds of crime have gone down in this Southern European country, despite the economic recession.

Agostinho said everything he earns “goes right into drugs, and it’s not enough. So at night I go to the home of my widowed mother, she feeds me, and – why not admit it – sometimes I lift some money she has stashed away, or some object to sell. She knows it, and accepts it. In the end, I’m the only thing she has left in her life.”

\*This story is the second of a [two-part series](#) on Portugal’s drug decriminalisation policy.