

# Promising Ways to Help At-Risk And Marginalized Youth Out of Drug Addiction

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**In Partnership With**

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# Executive Summary

This report presents a comprehensive analysis of initiatives aimed at facilitating the health, social development, and empowerment of marginalized youth, with a specific focus on those affected by drug addiction in Germany, Ghana, Liberia, and Switzerland. The purpose of this study is to identify effective approaches and transferable strategies to aid in the rehabilitation and reintegration of these youth, thereby providing a sustainable pathway out of addiction and marginalization.

Marginalized and drug-affected youth face significant challenges that hinder their social and economic development. The initiatives examined in this report—Karuna Drugstop, Transformative Impact Network, Slum Peacepreneurship Project, and Bateau Genève—serve as case studies demonstrating diverse methods to support these youth. The broader goal is to understand how these initiatives can be adapted across different cultural and socio-economic contexts to enhance their impact.

The research employed a mixed-methods approach, incorporating desk research, in-depth interviews, and focus groups. The methodology aimed to gather qualitative insights from various stakeholders, including social workers, journalists, high-level officials, and the youth themselves, to build a nuanced understanding of the effectiveness and challenges of the initiatives.

The findings reveal that all initiatives share the common mission to support marginalized youth by welcoming them and building a trusting relationship, but differ in their methods. People Berlin focuses on fashion design, the Transformative Impact Network (TIN) on education and creative expression, the Bateau Genève on socio-professional reintegration and skill building for employment, and the Slum Peacepreneurship Hubs on entrepreneurial training and peacebuilding. Successful rehabilitation requires seeing youth as whole individuals, addressing not just their addiction but also their educational, emotional, and social needs. The holistic approach is critical in building trust and fostering long-term recovery.

Particularly the initiatives in Switzerland and Germany have developed extensive networks with local businesses and community organizations, enhancing their support systems. While dedicated rehabilitation centers are called for especially by the West African youth, their design and operation are crucial. Poorly managed centers can become hubs for drug use. Successful centers integrate rehabilitation with vocational or entrepreneurial skill training and ongoing support. Role models and mentors play a significant role in motivating youth and providing guidance. This aspect was highlighted in all regions with youth leaders and professional mentors being particularly impactful in Liberia and at Bateau Genève.

In West Africa, extreme poverty and unemployment are primary factors driving youth towards drug use. Initiatives that focus on economic empowerment through vocational training and entrepreneurship show promise in addressing these root causes. In Ghana and Liberia, we found that drug-affected women face unique challenges, including higher risks of sexual violence and harassment, as well as greater difficulties in accessing supporting resources. Gender-sensitive approaches are necessary to effectively support affected female youth.

The study concludes that while the context and specific challenges vary across regions, several universal strategies can be effective in supporting marginalized, drug-affected youth. Holistic, nonjudgmental support, strong networks and partnerships, and the involvement of role models and mentors are critical components. However, economic and structural barriers require targeted interventions focusing on poverty alleviation and employment opportunities. Further barriers exist in stigmatization of the affected youth, which may be addressed by giving them a voice and the opportunities to prove themselves in society.

It is essential for initiatives to build networks resulting in robust support systems for the marginalized and at-risk youth. Rehabilitation services and vocational training centers, for instance, should be integrated with vocational training and continuous support to prevent them from becoming drug-use hubs. Programs could include mentorship components, utilizing local leaders and successful rehabilitated youth as role models. There should be a focus on economic empowerment through skills training and entrepreneurship to tackle the root causes of drug addiction. Additionally, programs should be designed to address the unique challenges faced by female youth, ensuring they receive appropriate support and protection.



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# Introduction and Contextualization

The Youth Kickstart applied research project focuses on promising ways to help at-risk and marginalized youth in Western Europe and West Africa out of drug addiction. We present four case studies focused mainly on youth empowerment through social entrepreneurship and vocational training. The scope of this research is narrowed to four countries: Switzerland, Liberia, Ghana, and Germany. The first main aim is to identify key elements of currently applicable drug policies in these countries on combating drug addiction amongst marginalized youth. Secondly, we wish to present the evolution of drug policies in the countries specified. Thirdly, the findings will be translated into comparing initiatives and approaches found, analyzing their applicability, and transnational transferability. Ultimately, we wish to provide concrete recommendations to our partner organization, the Angie Brooks International Centre for Women’s Empowerment, Leadership Development, International Peace and Security, to support the valuable services provided to the youth in Monrovia.

The stakeholder group of interest throughout our research is marginalized and at-risk youth who have fallen into drug addiction. UNICEF defines the concept of “marginalized” as disadvantaged, vulnerable, and/or marginalized individuals who are excluded from social, economic, and/or educational opportunities enjoyed by other adolescents in their community due to numerous factors beyond their control (Auerswald et al., 2017) We adopt this definition for our study as it is broader than others we found, thus we feel more applicable given we discuss four distinct countries.

The United Nations (UN) defines “youth” as individuals aged from 15 to 24 years old (UN, 2013). Rather than a standardized definition, we adopt country-specific definitions based on unique circumstances, as outlined in Table 1 (Youthpolicy, 2023).

Country	Age	Reference
Germany	14-26	Germany Social Code
Ghana	15-35	African Union, 2006
Liberia	15-35	African Union, 2006
Switzerland	16-25	Switzerland Youth Policy Strategy

Table 1: Country-specific definitions of Youth (Youthpolicy, 2023)

Social enterprises are defined as businesses with specific social objectives that serve their primary purpose; seeking profits while maximizing benefits to society, with profits principally used to fund social programs (Barone, 2022). The UN recognizes the importance of social enterprises by publishing “Youth Social Entrepreneurship and the 2030 Agenda”, a report discussing the positive impact and rich potential for social enterprises and states the commitment to providing support in this area (UN, 2020).

Drug addiction is characterized by diverse definitions, with many associated terms such as substance abuse and drug abuse. The European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction defines “problem drug use” as “injecting drug use or long duration/regular use of opioids cocaine and /or amphetamines” (EMCDDA, 2022). The World Health Organization refers to substance abuse as the harmful or hazardous use of psychoactive substances, including alcohol and illicit drugs (WHO, n.d.). This specific study will not include an investigation into “drug users” who may be seen as non-problematic users, for example in the context of being an occasional, recreational, or experimental user of drugs such as cannabis.

It is noteworthy that drug addiction is linked to developmental issues, with discourses linking the two becoming increasingly prevalent in global discussions (Alimi, 2019). The most direct impact of drug addiction is on people's physical and mental health, further reducing their efficiency in production and affecting broader economic development. It also contributes to instability in societies, with repercussions such as increases in crime rates and teenagers dropping out of school (Singer, 2008). It is argued, however, that drugs, both licit and illicit, have historically been an issue of economic development, and that the connection between drugs and development in reality is much more complex (Collins, 2020). According to the data from the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), young people remain the group most vulnerable to drugs, with drug use levels today in many countries higher than in the previous generation. For example, globally, those aged 15-16 had an annual prevalence of cannabis use of 5.34%, compared with 4.3% for adults in 2021. Throughout the African continent, 70% of people receiving drug treatment are below the age of 35 (UNODC, 2023).



While adopting these concepts, it is also crucial to delve deeper into each country's distinct social context. For instance, in Liberia, at-risk youth are impacted by the after-effects of the fourteen-year civil war between 1989 and 2003 (Borba et al., 2016). Switzerland, meanwhile, was a pioneer in addiction treatment, particularly regarding the controversial medical prescription of heroin, and has one of the highest GDP per capita in the world (Khan et al. 2014). Germany is the only one out of the four countries within the research that has legalized cannabis as of April 1, 2024, and within the European context is said to have had the highest number of drug-related deaths in 2022 (Tagesschau, 2024). Ghana has been working on the "National Drug Control Master Plan" to address drug abuse and trafficking more systematically and is planning on enforcing it until 2026 (Ghana News Agency, 2022).

Building upon the previous topics, we delve into the interconnections between them and explore new ways to address drug addiction. Policies have begun shifting from the "war on drugs", which has involved efforts since the 1970s to combat illegal drug use by escalating penalties, enforcement, and incarceration for drug offenders (DeBiasio,

n.d.), moving toward "human-rights-centered approaches" and "public-health-centered approaches," which look to promote and protect individual health - examples of these are detailed in the following section. Indeed, many deem the war on drugs to have failed, with devastating consequences for individuals and societies around the world (West Africa Commission on Drugs, 2018). These shifts provide new opportunities for innovative approaches to combat drug addiction.

Existing research lacks a specific focus on the role of social enterprises in addressing drug addiction. However, studies highlight the broader efficacy of social enterprises in tackling societal issues. For example, Ferguson utilizes a social enterprise model to address the homeless youth problem. In contrast to conventional approaches merely providing necessities like food and shelter, social enterprise helps homeless youth improve their mental health and mitigate high-risk behavior (Ferguson, 2007). The tensions between social missions and business goals are, however, intuitive; exploring these systematically can deepen our understanding of social enterprise and can bridge the gap between traditional organizational theories and this growing field, making them more

effective (Smith et al, 2013). Social entrepreneurs aim for enterprise growth based on providing perceived societal value, facing challenges like financing, staff retention, managing roles, and measuring impact; societal value and profit aren't mutually exclusive in social enterprises when navigating growth challenges within a business context (Hynes, 2009).

There is also strong evidence regarding the positive influences of football in the context of drug use. Research centered around the Leyton Orient Community Sports Programme argues that football matches offer appropriate, non-judgemental, and supportive local opportunities for personal development in terms of education, health, friendship, and employment (Crabbe, 2000). This transformative process involves cultivating relationships founded on trust and mutual understanding, serving as a foundation for establishing connections and opportunities. Also, Using Sport for Drug Abuse Prevention, an initiative conducted by UNODC, underscores that team sports such as football may be particularly effective for developing social skills. Sports can aid individual people struggling with drug abuse by instilling the right spirit, adding drug-related information and life skills train-

ing, and also improving community conditions (UNODCCP, 2002). Sport-based interventions targeting marginalized youth for social change can be, however, used as a form of social control if it involves a disproportionate focus on personal responsibility. A study focusing on a football-based program in London, suggests that while sports may offer benefits, effectiveness hinges on integration with broader social support and community engagement programs (Parker et. al, 2019).

These studies underline the promise of football and social enterprises in tackling drug abuse, urging us to delve deeper into their mechanisms. Understanding the specific environments created and their impact on drug users requires immersive engagement with participants. A nuanced, case-by-case approach is crucial, as highlighted by the majority of studies stressing the importance of social contexts. While football and social enterprises show positive outcomes in certain contexts, their effectiveness varies based on regional and cultural factors. Our focus remains on uncovering contextual nuances in each country, facilitating comparisons, and exploring transferability based on their unique conditions.

Our identified case studies; the social enterprise PEOPLE Berlin in Germany, the Transformative Impact Network in Tamale, Ghana, the Slum Peacepreneurship Project in Monrovia, Liberia, and the Bateau Genève in Geneva, Switzerland provide insights into how marginalized and drug-affected youth may be assisted; these will be analyzed and later compared through our discussion to draw conclusions and recommendations for existing and future initiatives aiming to support affected youth. Mainly, the case studies focus on social entrepreneurship and vocational training to support the youth. As an additional promising way, we have looked into football and sports and its potential role in providing support structures to combat drug addiction.

## Methodology

Our methodology involved initial desk research, to establish clear definitions and an understanding of the policy framework in the four countries, consulting diverse sources like international reports, academic journals, local media, and NGO reports, including valuable contributions from ABIC. These resources significantly enhanced our understanding of the contextual landscape. We are building upon this by focusing on

specific initiatives, in light of the time constraints limiting possibilities for exhaustive research. We have selected a representative project in each country, prioritizing those directly targeting disadvantaged youth affected by drug use and helping youth reintegrate into society. We also ensure the credibility of the initiatives and the availability of contacts of related people.

To understand these projects in detail, we collected qualitative primary data through in-depth discussions conducting interviews and focus groups. Semi-structured interviews offer focus and flexibility, while focus groups encourage comfort and diverse perspectives. Additionally, we have communicated with four groups of respondents, including youth, social workers of the projects, journalists, and policymakers. When choosing the specific method, we mainly consider the interviewee's needs to create a comfortable environment. For example, our communication with disadvantaged youth in Liberia was done with the help of our partner ABIC. For our focus groups, our Liberian partners went directly into the communities where the youth live. We passed on our questions to the social workers and they had a direct dialogue with the youth. The focus groups with the social

workers also created a relatively comfortable and familiar atmosphere for them. In contrast, social workers, journalists, and policymakers prefer one-on-one interviews for in-depth discussion. Figure 1 shows the people we have contacted and how we communicated with them.

These four groups provide us with a diverse perspective on the issue. For example, in Liberia, we have focus groups with disadvantaged youth in different communities, which show us the challenges they face and their expectations for the initiatives.

Country	Contacts	Research Method
Germany	One social worker at Karuna e.V.	Semi-structured interview
	One Fashion designer at People Berlin	Written correspondence
	Norbert Schäfer (member of the State Working Group on Drugs by the German Green Party, certified psychologist, and psychotherapist, ran a youth and drug counseling center for 38 years)	Semi-structured interview
Ghana	Mohammed Awal Abdallah (Managing Director of Transformative Impact Network Ghana)	Semi-structured interview
	Ghana drug policy research paper authors Lyes Tagziria (Senior Analyst of Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime) & Maria-Goretti Ane (Legal Practitioner, African Consultant for International Drug Policy Consortium)	Semi-structured interview
	One journalist focusing on drug use among youth	Semi-structured interview
Liberia	Aspiring youth in West Point, Center Street, Caldwell, Clara Town (About four to six youth were interviewed in each community).	Focus group in each community
	Three representatives from the community microenterprises	Semi-structured interview
	Two social workers of ABIC	Semi-structured interview
	Cllr. Yvette Chesson-Gibson (Establishment Coordinator of ABIC)	Semi-structured interview
	Three journalists covering drug use and community projects	Focus group
	Liberian high-level official	Written correspondence
Switzerland	Bénévoles at the Bateau Genève	Our team member Kevin's personal experience and his communications with other volunteers
	Communications and Public Relations Department of Genève Police Cantonal	Written correspondence
	Journalists both covering sports in society and drug use	Semi-structured interview

Figure 1: Interview and Focus Group Contacts

We also communicated with social workers whose rich working experiences tell us how to interact with disadvantaged youth and what support the initiative needs. Moreover, input from high-level individuals provides a macro perspective, while journalists offer an observer's perspective. This diverse input gives us a more comprehensive understanding of the problem.

During the interview and focus groups, several critical issues required our consideration. The first relates to technology, namely ensuring reliable internet connectivity when connecting with colleagues in areas with limited infrastructure, coupled with comprehensive note-taking. In particular, different interviewees tend to prefer different online platforms, such as our interviews in Liberia through WhatsApp calls. Second, safeguarding interviewee privacy, especially for youth, entails maintaining participant anonymity. To create a comfortable environment, we also explained in advance that we fully respected their ideas and they could remain silent on sensitive topics such as drug use. Third, we have encountered instances where interviews were rejected or interviewees were unreachable, especially policymakers. In such cases, we

adapted by seeking relevant secondary literature or consulting scholars who have studied drug policy to get additional information.

After collecting the data, we mainly relied on qualitative analysis to identify the main challenges that youth faced and the obstacles the initiative struggled with in different country contexts. Furthermore, we conducted a comparison among the four countries to uncover transferable experiences. Based on this analysis, we developed several practical recommendations for future projects.

## Case Studies in Focus

### Germany: People Berlin

In Europe more broadly, the drug issue was declared a "growing threat" by the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction in its 2024 report, and Germany has been at the unfortunate forefront of drug-related deaths in 2022 on the European level (Tagesschau, 2024b). The year 2023 has been reported as having the highest number of drug-related deaths in over 20 years in Germany (Tagesschau, 2024; Please see Figure 2).

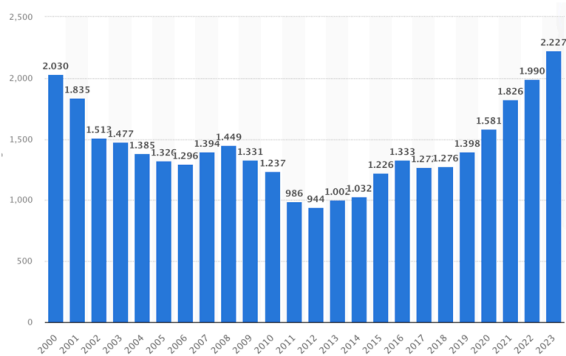


Figure 2: Number of Drug Deaths in Germany from 2000 to 2023 (Statista, 2024)

Germany has experienced a paradigm shift concerning drug policies to helping and protecting the affected instead of marginalizing and punishing them (Federal Government Commissioner for Drugs, 2012). Historically, policies criminalized drug use and aimed at abstinence, which is stated to have transformed into striving for acceptance and the provision of support (Schmidt-Semisich, 2020). The current National Policy Strategy for Drugs and Addiction, enacted in 2012 is based on the “four pillars” first implemented in Switzerland (see section below). It stresses the acknowledgment of addiction as a disease rather than a “personal failure”. These regulations also include laws to protect non-smokers and youth, as well as combating drug-related crime (Federal Government Commissioner for Drugs, 2012). There has additionally been a move for greater liberalization of drug policies concerning cannabis. On March 22, 2024, the German Federal Council passed the

Cannabis Act, authorizing its partial legalization (Federal Ministry of Health, 2024). Adults can consequently carry 25g of cannabis, and youth below 18 ought to be protected by prohibiting consumption close to them and in places such as schools, sports sites, children and youth facilities, playgrounds, and pedestrian zones during the day (Federal Law Gazette, 2024).

German drug users are from within the midst of society as opposed to marginal groups as in the past (Federal Government Commissioner for Drugs, 2012). Mr. Norbert Schäfer, our first interviewee in Germany, is a member of the State Working Group on Drugs by the German Green Party, as well as a certified psychologist, and psychotherapist who conceptualized and ran a youth and drug counseling center for 38 years. The main trend described by Mr. Schäfer is an increased consumption of psychedelics, crack, and cocaine. In Berlin, the number of drug law violations, addressed by the local police, has doubled from 2017 to 2023, with cocaine having become an easily accessible party drug for the youth, quick to be delivered via Telegram Messenger with “cocaine taxis” (Berliner Zeitung, 2024). A trend in the emergence of novel psychoactive substances with hardly assessable risks has also

been reported. Accessing drugs is generally facilitated through online platforms and there is a greater exchange of drug-related experiences. Therefore, information on how to get to certain states of intoxication is readily available (Federal Government Commissioner for Drugs, 2012).

Our second interviewee in Germany, a social worker at Karuna Drugstop, highlighted the rise in mixed consumption patterns, and the use of benzodiazepines and opioids by the youth to release anxiety and stress, in line with a recently published study funded by the Federal Ministry on Health on Benzodiazepine and Opioid Consumption in Adolescents and Young Adults (Haserück, 2024). This polysubstance abuse is increasing among youth, causing even greater health risks. Our interviewees in Germany both mentioned how the youth is increasingly overwhelmed and under the pressure of societal norms and performance expectations. The first main factor expressed was the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, leading to an increasing intersection of personal, private, and professional life through school and work from home, blurring boundaries between them and increasing stress levels. After the pandemic, the social worker at Karuna has seen an increase in youth ac-

cessing their services, and them being left behind in school through the pandemic. Similarly, German youth have been impacted by the compression of nine school years into eight at the highest secondary school level (i.e., Gymnasium). In Berlin, this was implemented in 2006, which led to more youth feeling under pressure (Anger & Thomsen, 2018). Our interviewee at Karuna mentioned that as a consequence, he sees more youth also from higher socioeconomic backgrounds accessing support services. Overall, our interviewee mentioned that youth within German society are expected to function, and once they do not function well, it is seen as an issue within the youth when it is to be regarded as connected to the broader context surrounding the youth.

This leads us to the discussion of promising ways to help marginalized and at-risk youth in Germany out of drug use. Mr. Schäfer stated that one key to effectively supporting the youth is a holistic approach in directly combining support for the youth with drug consultation. According to our interviewee, this is where most youth fall through in the current approach which is often fragmented, with little coordination between organizations. This fragmentation is in stark contrast to the fact that addiction is only part of

a drug-affected youth's life, and there are other issues than solely the addiction to address through supporting services.

Karuna Drugstop, which emerged as the flagship project of the new addiction support strategy of Berlin as the only youth institution, employs a holistic approach as such. The organization was founded in 1989 and is funded by the Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women, and Youth with its budget determined by the local Senate (Karuna e.V., 2023). Their approach is multidisciplinary, offering youth (aged 13-27) who are drug-affected, mentally ill, or (at risk of being) homeless counseling, a daycare center, as well as involvement in a sound studio, or the social enterprise and fashion label PEOPLE Berlin. The main objective is to support drug-affected youth, providing them with advice, and a safe space to express themselves in whichever way they feel most comfortable. The approach is constantly adjusted to the needs of the youth, employing new ways to engage them according to our second interviewee in Germany. Karuna Drugstop greatly emphasizes its open-door policy, where the youth are welcomed in at any point and welcomed back if ever they leave the services.

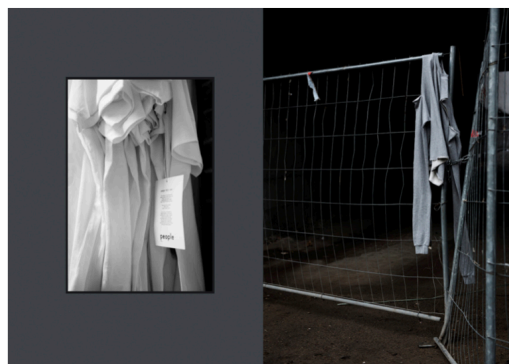


Figure 3: Social Enterprise to Support Drug-Affected and At-Risk Youth: Fashion Label People Berlin, photography by Filine Fink (Hellhake & Fink, 2019)

The social entrepreneurship initiative case study of this research for Berlin, the fashion label PEOPLE Berlin, was founded in 2015 by three fashion designers who joined Karuna Drugstop, and now work in the same team as the social workers but with a different approach. According to our respondent at Karuna e.V., "The youth are the label". The goal is to offer the youth a means of self-expression, to challenge the status quo in society while still being in a safe space where their identities are protected under the label name "People" (Hellhake & Fink, 2019). In addition to funding from the Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women, and Youth, the social enterprise is financed through its own proceeds, as well as the Volkswagen Employee Foundation, and terre des hommes Germany (Toth, 2019).



“ **People gives me strength, and the ability to keep going and not to give up. So that we can achieve getting a better life and do not need to be on the streets anymore.**

- Youth involved with the fashion label PEOPLE Berlin (FluxFM Berlin, 2018)

The approach of the fashion designers is to build rapport first, offering open workshops for the youth to get comfortable, try out fashion design, and then to determine if and how they would like to participate (Vogue, 2019). The goal is for the youth to be engaged, and to explore and delve into their talents and strengths (People Newsletter, 2024). One of the fashion designers at PEOPLE Berlin informed us that they are currently working on the launch of their new collection “Edition 6 less” before the start of the Berlin Fashion Week of 2024. Accordingly, they are shooting videos, pictures, and preparing People’s pop-up shop, selling clothing, accessories, ceramics, and other items. The key takeaway from PEOPLE Berlin is how they grant the disadvantaged and at-risk youth freedom of expression through a creative process, the youth being protected

and anonymous but provided with an opportunity to make themselves heard and challenge societal norms, giving them the visibility they deserve.

At times it is emotionally, or mentally challenging for the youth to stay engaged in the social enterprise, but they can re-engage whenever they are ready, as our interviewee at Karuna expressed to us. They have constant support through the integration of the various services within Karuna Drugstop that allow them to find a safety net in either creative expression or consultation services, but also through the network of initiatives under the main organization Karuna e.V.

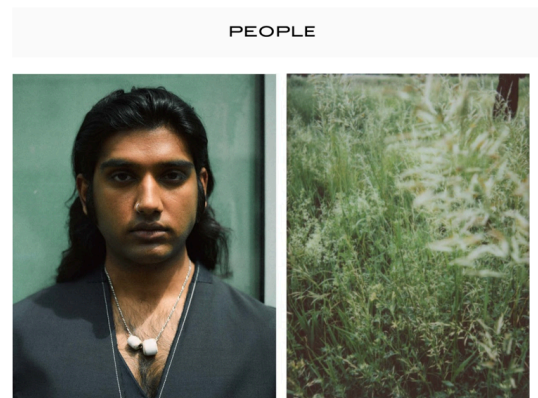


Figure 4: Pictures by Jana Gerberding and the fashion label People for the launch of the new collection “Edition 6 less - less pressure, less form, and less adherence to social norms and prejudices. It’s a response to the overwhelming rules, norms, and noise that pervade our lives.” (People Berlin Newsletter, 2024)

## **Ghana: Transformative Impact Network (TIN)**

Ghana is one of the transit hubs for illicit drugs, especially cocaine due to its location. During this process, the drug often enters the local market. Drug use in Ghana was found to be most prevalent among those with a lower socio-economic status and male citizens. Lucia Bird (2019) states that female drug use has been underreported due to greater stigmatization of female drug users and that addiction has generally been socially stigmatized, resulting in social isolation, and shunning of the affected, who subsequently might not seek treatment. In recent years, there have been changing trends in drug use patterns in Ghana, for example, a shift from mono-drug to polysubstance use. By 2017 the vast majority of people seeking treatment were reportedly using more than one substance, typically a mixture of alcohol, marijuana, cocaine, and heroin (Bird, 2019). Additionally, there has been an emergence of the misuse of tramadol. Tramadol, an opioid medically prescribed for pain relief, has become a now a new “fad” among Ghanaian youth (Bird, 2019). Based on our interviews with the manager of our identified Ghanaian initiative, some nurses and doctors with access to

tramadol are involved in its trade. When tramadol is not accessible due to restrictions, users are more likely to start smoking and taking cocaine and other types of drugs.

Ghana faces many difficulties in dealing with drug users. Prominent issues include corruption, inadequate resources, and social discrimination. Firstly, corruption has influenced the drug market. Political parties have an interest in allowing the cocaine trade to persist. The police also ask for bribes from drug users to prevent their arrest. Many powerful people are involved in the drug trade, making it challenging to combat illegal drugs. The issue ranges from the issue of smuggling drugs into the country through bribed customs officials to clandestine storage in warehouses and working through pharmacies. Moreover, Ghana lacks the resources to establish adequate rehabilitation centers and other services. The rehabilitation centers are concentrated in Accra and Ashanti, while people from large urban centers in the south are particularly poorly served (Tagziria et al., 2023). A researcher focusing on Ghana’s drug use highlights that accessibility is very low: “The only hospital that has the facility near the place I live is about 500 kilometers away. How will such

an ordinary citizen be able to access this?”. And the fee for the rehabilitation center is not affordable for many people. While the recommended duration of inpatient treatment is 12 months, financial constraints force many patients to leave before completion, which increases the risk of relapse. (Bird, 2019). Furthermore, social discrimination also exerts huge pressure on youth with drug issues. A researcher focusing on Ghana’s drug policy pointed out that Ghana has criminal sanctions for drug users. In most areas, a police clearance certificate is required to find a job, which makes it impossible for many young people to be employed. Besides, when the youths return to school, teachers and students often display a rather unfriendly attitude. One interviewee mentioned that students say “I don’t want to sit with a junkie in class”. Social discrimination is even more evident among women. A counselor at a rehabilitation center in Accra explained that society looks down more on women who have an addiction (Tagziria et al., 2023). The stigma is exacerbated as women struggle to access treatment, as many rehabilitation centers accept only men.

Against this background, Ghana implemented a new legislative framework on

drugs in 2020 (Act 1019). Minister of the Interior Ambrose Dery stressed that one of the primary goals of the new law is to treat drug use and addiction as a public health issue, converting prison terms for drug possession into non-custodial alternatives, including financial penalties (Tagziria et al., 2023). The aim is for a “more humane drug policy”, reducing penalties on low-level offenders while still cracking down more strictly on drug trafficking. The policy should also help to change people’s perceptions of drug users to some extent. Formerly, a hard punitive approach to all drug-related offenses had been prescribed with a five-year imprisonment, or ten years for more serious offenses like drug trafficking and possession (Bird, 2019).

Many practitioners related to drug-addiction governance in Ghana have reported that law enforcement and other agencies are now willing to engage with civil society organizations working on drug-related issues, for example, joint training between health centers and local police has been conducted (Tagziria et al., 2023, p.19). A researcher focusing on Ghana drug use points out that these organizations can help people who use drugs to socialize away from high-risk areas like the ghettos and activi-

ties. However, it will take time to translate policy directions into practice. It is crucial to sensitize the higher levels of policy so that it filters down to the local street police who interact directly with the drug users.

In this context, a representative initiative called Transformative Impact Network Ghana (TIN Ghana) is working in the Northern regions of the country to foster inclusive growth and development. TIN Ghana was established in 2022 by Mohammed Awal Abdallah and Nadia Ali Dawuda. Mr. Abdallah has participated in the Women's Situation Rooms in Ghana, one of ABIC's representative projects. One of TIN Ghana's goals is to promote meaningful youth participation. Mr. Abdallah highlights that they are particularly aware of the situation of disadvantaged youth with drug use and other problems. As a newly established initiative, TIN Ghana plans to seek support from agencies like UNDP, USAID, ERASMUS, and other NGOs. The network is also an important part of its future work. TIN Ghana is open to building alliances with other organizations for further funding. The initiative has also engaged in an international youth exchange conference with German initiatives to exchange best practices and ex-

plore future avenues for collaboration (TIN Ghana, 2022).



Figure 5: International Youth Exchange Conference with the Transformative Impact Network Ghana and German counterparts (TIN Ghana, 2022)

Compared to the initiatives in the other three countries, this is still in an early stage. TIN Ghana is still working to establish connections with disadvantaged youth. The program manager emphasized the importance of maintaining a non-judgmental attitude to help the youth feel comfortable sharing their experiences and concerns. A journalist focusing on drug use also stresses that, instead of shouting at them and embarrassing them, it is important to learn about their experiences first. TIN also holds a community forum on drug abuse, inviting parents, teachers, and victims of drug abuse to build an understanding of the impact of drug abuse and stimulate discussions about the future of affected people.

## “ It is a collective fight, and a collective responsibility.

- Mohammed Awal Abdallah

As the program manager stresses “It is a collective fight, and a collective responsibility.”

Moreover, “theater” has played an important role in their activities. They have organized many plays with children and youth. It is a safe way to expose kids to difficult situations and show them firsthand how to handle these situations. The theater also introduces young people to new vocabulary and ways of communicating (TIN Ghana, 2022). It provides the possibility to help the youth with drug use issues. Besides, the program manager indicates that they are anticipating building the capacities of substance abuse victims through skills training, enabling them to become entrepreneurs. Examples include soap making, bead making, sewing, carpentry, coding, and IT skills. Based on these skills, they seek engagements with businesses and enterprises where these individuals can earn a decent income. They also aim to provide start-up capital to those eligible to start their enterprises. A researcher focusing on Ghana drug use also points out that joblessness is the main reason people turn to drugs. Without a stable

income and resources, they cannot take care of their lives and families. Thus, economic empowerment provides opportunities to solve the problem. The manager also stressed that before starting their enterprises, it is important to help them get rid of drugs, rebuild their confidence, and integrate into their families and society.

In summary, there have been changes in drug use patterns and policies in Ghana in recent years. Social initiatives, represented by TIN Ghana, have also tried to further engage with drug-affected youth, and solve problems through plays and social entrepreneurship.

## **Liberia: Slum Peacepreneurship Hubs**

It is first important to shed light on the post-war challenges in Liberia, particularly concerning former combatants and drug addiction. Liberia endured two civil wars between 1989-1996 and between 1999-2003 during which approximately 250,000 people were killed (8% of the population) and almost the entire population was internally displaced. Most government infrastructure, including health and education, collapsed, leaving Liberians to rebuild from next to nothing (Borba et al., 2016). 70% of the combatants who fought in the civil wars were youth and

15% were below the age of 18 (Petruzzi et al., 2018). There has been an absence of comprehensive policies and rehabilitation initiatives tailored to address drug addiction among these individuals alongside systemic inconsistencies and human rights abuses within Liberia's criminal justice system. It is believed that the reorientation of drug policy requested in 2015 has started since in Liberia, with a prioritization of public health and human rights, to avert further destabilization in Liberia and the broader West African region (Togba, 2015).

Around Monrovia, it is estimated approximately 4,000-6,000 individuals grapple with drug-related challenges, including public consumption. Approximately 10-20% of these users are women, with an average age of 32-36 years. Notably, children have been observed in these settings (Evanno, 2021). The rise of drug use among Liberian youth is seen to pose severe threats to society, leading to increased crime and poverty alongside decreased human security. This led President Joseph Boakai to declare drug abuse a "public health emergency", and kush, a fatal drug consumed by the disadvantaged youth, as a "national threat" (Voice of Africa, 2024). We have confirmed this information through written correspondence

with a Liberian high-level official and learned that the budget for the Liberian Drug Enforcement Agency (LDEA) for 2024 amounts to approximately USD 2,000,000. Compared to around USD 400,000 in 2022, this is a significant increase, and a slight increase from close to USD 1,900,000 in 2023 (Gaye, 2023). Additionally, our correspondent informed us that an additional budget of around USD 326,000 for a "KUSH must go" project is available from the government. The Liberian government has further set up a steering committee to counter drug use, among others including the Ministry of Youth and Sports.

The official position seems clear, but we have heard some more critical voices about high-level officials in politics being involved in facilitating drug trade among two unrelated other respondents within Liberia whose identities we will not disclose for their protection. According to our high-level official correspondence, the former Director General of the LDEA Hon. Abraham S. Kromah had been pushing ahead with making arrests on those suspected to be involved in drug cartels during his appointment, which he also stated in a press conference at the start of May, 2024 (LB Online TV, 2024). We were told by our interviewees

that the borders of Liberia are permeable to the illicit drug trade, with few entry points being checked by security forces, and that drug dealers are deeply embedded within the respective communities, resulting in high availability of drugs. Not only kush is a current threat, but also a newer drug called zombie, cited to be the “most powerful drug affecting communities”, “more dangerous than kush”, and very fatal by our respondents engaging with the youth, as well as Liberian journalists.

The drug-affected youth often live disconnected from their families, once they fall into drug use they often find themselves in the “ghettos”, as stated by our interviewees directly engaged with the youth, as well as by the Liberian journalists who reported seeing new faces every time they return to the marginalized communities. Women in particular face the danger of sexual violence and have a harder time accessing supporting resources, as those involved with the youth told us. Additionally, a mainly gender-specific issue is that of women going into prostitution to be able to afford their drug use (Kimani & von Mirbach, 2024). Our interviewees mentioned intergenerational post-civil war challenges, as well as the Ebo-

la pandemic as exacerbating factors in the drug use among young citizens.



Figure 7: Picture taken by Mr. Archie Collindious Gbessay prior to our focus group with the youth in Clara Town

The youth who have never been engaged with any initiative assisting in combating drug use cited what mostly held them back in the past. They listed their habits (i.e. their addiction), peer pressure (having to explain themselves to peers if they decide to take part in an initiative), empty promises by NGOs that drop in once and never return, a lack of shelter, food, and healthcare to cover their basic needs, having been neglected and rejected in society, and the issue of not having the means for transportation, as barriers to accessing help. However, the youth showed great willingness to be engaged and change their situation if an entity came in and lived up to their promises.

“

**Nothing would stop me, I am completely optimistic that no factor would derail the process.**

*- Voices of youth in Center Street when asked what would hold them back from getting involved in vocational training and rehabilitation services*

This great willingness also shines through in avid demonstrations by the youth against the demolition of the New Life Recovery Rehabilitation Center in Monrovia, which had been offering vocational training (Azango, 2023). The youth we interviewed have expressed to us that they are more than willing to build up and co-create any support center that provides them with vocational training and helps them to be rehabilitated from their addiction. Our interviewees' aspirations are high, they stressed how much talent lies within their communities, and that their goals are to become human rights lawyers, musicians, construction workers, the president, and journalists, and going back to their education or their former occupations before they fell into addiction, amongst others.

Channeling these high objectives into tangible social enterprises is the goal of our

Liberian case study, ABIC's Slum Peacepreneurship Project (within the scope of the Entrepreneurial and Peacebuilding Interventions for Youth in Slums in Liberia against Organised Crime and Gang Violence). It was financially supported by the Resilience Fund of the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organised Crime and the plan was prepared in 2020 (Mensah, 2021). The project has provided Liberian youth with 18-month-long entrepreneurial skills training and was aimed at over 250 young people across Montserrado County (Mensah, 2021). The youth were encouraged to identify issues within their own slum communities that they wanted to address through a self-sustaining and financially viable social enterprise, which they pitched at a pitch festival. Six winners out of twelve communities were granted 5,000 USD to start their proposed business projects in 2022.



Figure 6: Liberian youth taking part in the Angie Brooks International Centre's Slum Peacepreneurs Hub (Tweh, 2021)



With deep gratitude, we were able to speak directly to three entrepreneurs who had won the seed capital, under the coordination of Hon. Cllr. Yvette Chesson-Gibson, Mrs. Sabine Meitzel, Mr. Hilary Gbegeah, and Mr. Archie Collindious Gbessay. The first representative entrepreneur told us how the women in her community had successfully negotiated a contract with a local market association, earning LRD 8,000 per market waste pick-up once a week for the community, and the men sourced local shops to pick up their waste. The first social enterprise is a commercial waste collection project in West Point. The entrepreneur was kind enough to share some challenges they had encountered throughout the process, namely maintaining the equipment needed, and an internal dispute due to a lack of profit-sharing of the men involved with the women. Additionally, there has been a recent change in leadership of the enterprise, as one member had stolen some of the equipment.

Our second interviewee leads a laundry soap production enterprise in Bentol City, that is currently aiming to secure an alternative production site to the one initially contacted, as it had been leased to others. The main challenge the business woman we

spoke to faced was attrition of team members. At the moment, she is impressively spearheading the enterprise with only one other individual. Other project members were lost as they had hoped to get the USD 5,000 in cash and were disappointed when this was not the case. Our interviewee herself is professionally trained to handle the materials needed in soap production, and is ready and determined to realize the project once attaining the needed production site.

The third representative is heading a cosmetology project by Old Road District #10, including individuals who have expertise in the area as well. He reported current challenges in obtaining land for the project, as the prices for spaces are high, but also great dedication in kickstarting the project once a space is procured. Secondly, the challenge of retaining team members was echoed by our third interviewee, who stated that many left the project.

Tying these challenges together, the implications are as stated by our interviewees who were engaged in leading the Peacepreneurship project. The first implication for initiatives targeting drug-affected and at-risk youth is that there is a need for continu-

ous engagement and support throughout the projects, as offered by ABIC in our Liberian case study. Promises need to be delivered by any organization wishing to help the youth, as stressed by the youth who took part in the focus groups that ABIC coordinated for us in Center Street. The second main implication is the great difficulty in getting the youth far enough from drugs when assisting them in taking the ownership of their lives that they strive for. ABIC's initiatives are effective based on decade-long relationships built with the youth, creating deep trust and showing the youth they are respected and met openly, providing them a voice, and including their needs directly into the design of projects such as the Pea-preneurship Project. With regard to building trusting relationships for ways of combating drug use to be effective, another theme often recurring in our focus groups with the youth was that of the power of role models and high-level officials engaging with them. The youth in the communities expressed it felt "special", "very good", "so great", and like they could be one of them in the future when speaking of how high-level officials and youth leaders had engaged with them throughout their experiences with ABIC. This high-level engagement with the

youth, as well as strongly engaging youth leaders and role models in future efforts in combating drug use is a great point of leverage to ensure motivation and retaining youth in the projects. Hon. Cllr. Yvette Cheson-Gibson was generous to share with us an avenue that ABIC is exploring, namely setting up a vocational training and rehabilitation services center between two remote villages in Liberia to address the challenges and needs outlined in the abovementioned. The aspect of remoteness is believed to be of great importance, as existing rehabilitation centers are poorly run, and greatly infiltrated by drugs. The idea is for the youth to implement newly learned skills directly in the communities neighboring the center, earn wages, and provide valuable services to the communities. Potentially, the trained youth could further pass on their acquired skills to more disadvantaged youth, for instance through a mentorship program, creating a virtuous cycle of societal reintegration. We asked the youth directly how they would personally design a vocational training center for themselves. The answers were varied but can be classified into five broad categories. The first set of answers surrounded interest in obtaining (1) construction and engineering skills. A second group

of youth in our focus groups brought up their interest in (2) entrepreneurial training and attaining leadership skills that would be transferable across all types of employment. Thirdly, the youth mentioned how they would wish to (3) further pursue their education, or be involved in literacy programs such as computer literacy. For this aspect, direct collaboration with educational institutions is an avenue that may be explored. A fourth group was interested in learning (4) how to provide communal services such as beauty services. These categories that we found in our focus groups partly reflect the projects conceptualized during the Pea-preneurship project. The potential added benefit of a vocational training and rehabilitation services center is having a central hub for empowering youth, at a location not as likely to be infiltrated by drugs, where counseling, vocational training, and continuous support of further new social enterprises have the potential to be directly combined.

A last point worth noting stems from our interviews with Liberian journalists. They told us how they face great difficulties in speaking to the youth, as they are often seen critically as wanting to make a profit of the youths' situation. Additionally, they put their own lives and those of their families at risk

when reporting critically on the involvement of certain actors in the procurement and dissemination of drugs. As it is important to report on the current situation, to catalyze needed support for the youth, and also to give them a platform in society, an opportunity may be to open up a press room with the youth directly to allow them to share their voices in whichever capacity they wish, and they could choose to remain anonymous. This would allow the youth a form of expression and actively participating in society, but also the journalists to have a safe and more accepted way of helping in spreading awareness on the situation of marginalized and at-risk youth.

## **Switzerland**

In Switzerland, drug use is more prevalent in males with a ratio of approximately 2:1 (UNODC, 2023), with figures much higher in the 20-24 age bracket. A sharp increase in cocaine use has also been recorded (UNODC, 2023). No breakdown by any other factor such as socio-economic background was available. The organization "Addiction Switzerland" has since highlighted the need for novel action due to new types of drugs, such as ready-to-consume "crack rocks", which have broken the relative stability of

the drug landscape and drug use in public spaces on the rise again (Keystone-SDA, 2023). This change has been exacerbated by the advent of “e-commerce” drug dealing, with reports of “an Uber for synthetic drugs” operating in Geneva (Tribune de Genève, 2023a). The explosion of crack use was also highlighted by a local journalist (Journalist CH1) covering the topic over the last two years. They told us that Geneva now has one of the highest per capita problem crack users of cities in Europe.

Swiss drug policy aims to minimize drug use and its negative consequences. Similar to Germany, it is based on four pillars: prevention, therapy, harm reduction, and repression (Federal Office of Public Health, n.d.). With several legal packages, starting in 1991, the Swiss federal government reacted to rampant drug problems and open drug scenes in cities, such as the infamous “Needle Park” (Platzspitz) in Zurich (Wolf & Herzig, 2019). It developed a new public health approach to drug policy that no longer tried to achieve abstinence as a primary goal. These changes made Switzerland a pioneer in addiction treatment, particularly regarding the controversial medical prescription of heroin. The revision of the Narcotics Act (NarcA) 2008 enshrined the

four-pillar drug policy in law. Switzerland highlighted the influence of coalition building across stakeholder groups from many professions and politicians on various levels when it comes to formulating and starting initiatives for new drug policy and its innovations, which involved facilitating communication and encouraging scientific knowledge (Khan et al. 2014).

From contact with the Geneva cantonal police, we were also able to learn that the implementation of policy is reasonably aligned with its objectives, even in the face of the rising crack problem. They informed us that they do not wish nor expect to eradicate the problem or to prosecute all those involved, even dealers. We were told they “exercise a form of deterrent harassment without being excessive so as not to cause users to move to other places”. This was because their “desire is to contain them in order to be able to keep control”. They also informed us of some practical difficulties relating to prosecutions of crack dealers specifically. The established activities of dealers allows for convictions by the Public Prosecutor's Office, but it was explained that penalties remain an insufficient deterrent due to quantity-based sentencing and as such laws are not yet adapted to crack, with it being un-

certain if they will be. They expressed their frustration in justly arresting someone in the morning only to find them back on the streets a few hours later; in their opinion, the dangerousness of crack should become a primary factor in the sentencing of dealers.

Public attitudes towards drug abuse have begun to align with the shift from “traditional” hardline views associated with the war on drugs. Most of the Swiss population, often considered conservative and resistant to change, support investments and changes in drug policy. This is due to efforts to involve, inform, and mobilize civil society and in educating the public (Wolf & Herzig, 2019). In fact, significant resources are dedicated by the city of Geneva towards combating drug issues in this way; recently, 6 million Swiss francs was earmarked to deal with the rising crack problem in line with the four-pillar policy (Tribune de Genève, 2023b). This was a move generally supported by the general public according to journalist CH1. Furthermore, one of the most well-known and recommended spots in Geneva to spend an evening in summer is at the bar on the Bateau Genève, the case study which has been chosen and we now introduce.

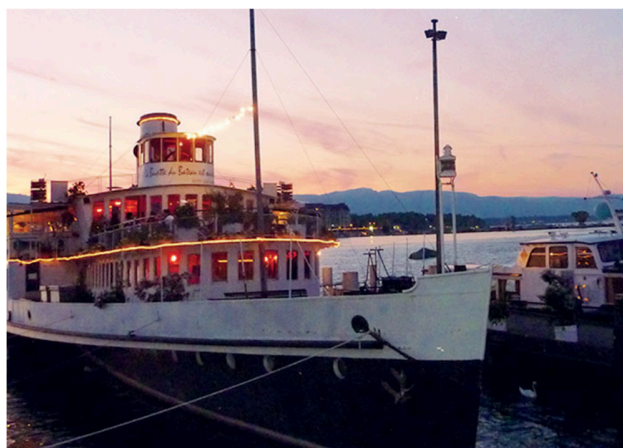


Figure 8: The Bateau Genève at Lac Léman, located slightly remotely within Geneva, and welcoming all passengers aboard

Le Bateau Genève is a private social association, created in 1974 when the “dilapidated, unproductive, doomed to demolition” boat “Genève” was given a second lease of life and a new reason to exist; to help and empower people who find themselves in a precarious situation or facing personal and social difficulties (Association pour le Bateau Genève, 2024). The Bateau Genève is part of the cultural and social heritage of the city as the first two-deck lounge boat in Lake Geneva, inaugurated during the national exhibition of 1896. The association’s secondary mission is to preserve this heritage, specifically by involving passengers (those who come to the Bateau for help) in the restoration work.

Initially, the Bateau focused specifically on drug-affected individuals though over time, this focus broadened to include a wider range of marginalized groups and societal

issues. The recent developments with regards to the crack problem in Geneva have renewed emphasis on drug-related support, however, with the approved budget for the coming year allocating significant resources specifically for assisting crack users. This re-allocation highlights the organization's flexibility and responsiveness to emerging community needs, ensuring targeted support for those affected by crack addiction.

The Bateau's flagship initiative is its social reintegration ("insertion socio-professionnelle") program. Daily activities for passengers include providing free breakfast every weekday and dinner on the weekends, access to telecommunications, distribution of hygiene products, grooming services, expression workshops, letter writing, language courses, games, sewing, theater and computer workshops and skills training. These activities are always free to access and without restriction, aiming to contribute to the social integration of people from different backgrounds (Association pour le Bateau Genève, 2024). We interviewed Mr. Pascal Thurnherr, a member of the Board of the Bateau Genève. He remarked a particularly impressive characteristic of this initiative, "You don't try to change them, just accept them as they come".

“ **You don't try to change them, just accept them as they come.**

- Mr. Pascal Thurnherr on the Bateau Genève

The Bateau Genève is dedicated to empowering individuals from various backgrounds by identifying their existing skills and interests and providing opportunities to develop them further. Each year, the Bateau Genève offers 30 internships across its three main functions: bar work, boat maintenance, and stewardship and preparation of social receptions. These internships provide a hands-on learning experience in real work environments. Interns at the Bateau Genève can obtain apprenticeships in any of the 15 recognized trades, ranging from carpentry to restaurant floor service, which are required to maintain the venue's three operations. Throughout their training, interns are supported by professionals in the trades who are employed by the Bateau. These professionals act as mentors, providing guidance and expertise to help the interns succeed.

Moreover, the Bateau Genève continues to support its interns even after their internships. Interns have the opportunity to apply

for jobs with organizations linked to the Bateau, effectively creating an internal job board for former interns. This system ensures that interns not only gain valuable skills and experience but also have a pathway to long-term employment and career development within a supportive network.

The Bateau cooperates with a variety of partners, including other social associations, local businesses, and dedicated volunteers. The extensive range of services and support provided by the Bateau Genève would not be possible without the "impressive network of institutions and associations" that the organization has meticulously built over the years. This is fundamental to the Bateau's ability to offer such diverse and impactful assistance to its passengers, as detailed by a quote found on their website: "The implementation of partnerships - formalized or not - is an essential condition of the effectiveness of our integration program."

Local businesses play a crucial role in this network, offering further internships, apprenticeships, and job placements for former interns of the Bateau. This collaboration not only provides tangible opportunities for employment but also fosters a sense of community involvement and social respon-

sibility among local enterprises. Volunteers (including members of this research team!) are another vital component of the Bateau's network. Their commitment and diverse skill sets allow the Bateau to run various workshops and activities, such as the daily breakfasts, that might otherwise be unavailable.



# Football— Another Promising Avenue?

During our research, we were not able to find any specific initiative that directly helps disadvantaged youth using football and other sports. We decided to expand our scope to all sports given the lack of specific initiatives, which allowed us to collect insightful data into the role sport in general as a tool for solving societal issues such as marginalization and drug addiction.

Pascal Thurnherr, as well as being a board member of the Bateau Genève, is a journalist from Radio Télévision Suisse who focuses on the role of sport in society. He shared a compelling story of a sprinter addicted to heroin who overcame his addiction through sports. The sprinter told Mr. Thurnherr that it was the love and ambition for the sport that saved him from the addiction as he prioritized the thought of: “I want to be a sprinter again. I want to be a champion”. He also shared a story of a young marginalized immigrant from the Ivory Coast that he met when he was also young; people in their Swiss community expected the young im-

migrant to be a failure in life, but through dedicating his youth to sports, he developed exceptional discipline, ambition and ability to deal with adversity. These transferable skills enabled him to become the leading figure in his industry later in life.

In Liberia, ABIC held the Unity Games following the Women’s Situation Room in Liberia in 2023, where men played football and women played a local variant called kickball. This activity helped encounter political friction and foster a peaceful atmosphere during the election. It also engaged youth leaders and helped the disadvantaged youth to feel safe and involved. This was a great example of how sport can bring people together toward a common goal, and can be a welcome distraction from entrenched thoughts or positions, such as those found in political friction or drug addiction. This added to our overall impression while conducting this research that the football pitch (or sports field) is a place where, by and large, everyone is welcome unconditionally, something Mr. Thurnherr also mentioned. While it cannot be ignored



that in some cases, sport can breed discrimination, we found most sports activities to be run by associations or clubs, which are open by nature and have the ability to bring people from different backgrounds together, thus helping to build a strong society which fights marginalization. It became clear that regardless of specialization, social status, and education, if people participate in these initiatives, they can gain energy and capacity to improve their lives.

In general, sports are educational, social, and beneficial for health, playing a pivotal role in social development; points which were strongly stressed by Mr. Thurnherr. He also stressed the limitations of sport in this context, however. He pointed out that sports itself can also become an addiction, believing that people are often susceptible to falling into addiction to anything, with the problem being addiction itself rather than a specific substance or activity. Moreover, he emphasized that addressing drug addiction through sports requires a multidisciplinary approach that includes experts in sports, drug addiction, and social work: "Put people around the table with various approaches, various knowledge"

Across the board, interviewees stressed the importance of encouraging more people to participate in potentially powerful social initiatives. A significant barrier identified is that people cannot imagine that their participation could make a difference. Another factor that we identified is the fact that football and many sports are very competitive and require good physical condition, while drugs are harmful to health, and drug users may not have the capacity to participate in these activities. An interesting point made by Mr. Thurnherr is that the trend among young people is towards consuming sports through streaming platforms and social media and that this could be better utilized to get more young people involved.

But these risks can be mitigated appropriately, and we believe that football and sport do not necessarily have to be the sole basis for the initiatives. Sports can be part of the current initiative, and while not as directly beneficial as vocational training, it can provide an inclusive environment that can positively impact them through sport and further promote the integration of disadvantaged youth into society.

While football and other sports offer significant benefits and hold promise as tools for

social integration and rehabilitation, they are unlikely to serve as the sole foundation for comprehensive support initiatives. Maintaining an inclusive and welcoming environment within sports clubs can help mitigate these challenges, offering a space where marginalized individuals can find acceptance and community.

The principles learned through sports—such as discipline, teamwork, and resilience—are highly transferable and can aid in personal development and recovery. Many sports clubs also offer additional benefits, such as educational opportunities and various forms of support (e.g., psychological, economic), potentially providing a holistic support system for marginalized or drug-affected individuals.

By integrating sports into a broader support framework, we believe it is possible to harness the potential of sport to empower and rehabilitate disadvantaged youth, helping them to build healthier, more resilient futures.



# Discussion

Government budgets for rehabilitation efforts have been increasing in both regions, with a noticeable shift in public policy narratives towards supporting health-based approaches, most recently in West Africa. Various views were expressed on the question of policies and stances of the government. Interviewees from Switzerland and Germany (both journalists and social workers) spoke more positively of government support given to initiatives helping drug-affected youth, encouraging these partnerships to grow further. The main critique was towards a lack of political will; a German social worker pointed out the politicians' refusal to acknowledge the extent of the issue of drug abuse among the youth and low budgets and mentioned how there is far greater demand than offerings for affected youth. Journalist CH1 highlighted opposition among many political circles in Switzerland to increased funding for drug issues.

Liberian social workers broadly welcomed the fact that the government had finally begun changing its philosophy towards the issue of drug-affected youth and commended the new state budget dedicated to

supporting this priority issue. However, some Liberian interviewees (mainly journalists) either contested the authenticity of this commitment or suggested that the government simply does not have the resources or power to implement even sincere policy changes. Even those journalists that were generally more supportive of the recent Liberian government emphasized the importance of keeping all initiatives for drug-affected youth free from political influence. Meanwhile in Ghana, interviewees were generally more critical of the government's refusal to prioritize this issue. There remains a lack of faith in West Africa in the institutions tasked with solving the issue, as these are often the same entities exacerbating it. In fact, both Liberian and Ghanaian interviewees also spoke of the role of corruption in sustaining the high levels of drugs in communities, although the corruption took distinct forms; for example, in Liberia, customs officers were being bribed to allow drugs through borders and in Ghana healthcare workers were being bribed to distribute tramadol without prescriptions.

There was also a key difference in the experiences of journalists covering these issues across countries, as journalists in Liberia spoke of being harassed and threatened

during their work, while no European interviewees mentioned any such threats. It should be underscored, however, that many journalists we reached out to in Western Europe were not willing to participate in the research.

Regarding the roots of the issue of drug-affected youth, the vast majority of interviewees emphasized peer pressure as a primary factor leading to youth drug addiction. African interviewees highlighted poverty as a significant cause of drug addiction, obstructing access to rehabilitation due to lack of fundamental resources, sick or unavailable family members, and scarce employment opportunities. This was especially the case in Liberia, with the civil war still remarked as one of the root causes of the youth drug abuse epidemic; not only did it bring untold disruption to the population, but child soldiers were forced to participate in combat, including by being physically forced to ingest drugs and develop addiction. In Western Europe, poverty was not as explicitly mentioned; in fact, the wide range of socioeconomic backgrounds of the people seeking help was accentuated in both countries.

Participants from both Ghana and Liberia also highlighted some gender-specific aspects to this societal issue, namely that women are more likely to be raped while under the influence of drugs (leading to unwanted pregnancy and fatherless children) and also more likely to get harassed if they leave their home to seek essential resources and rehabilitation services. In Liberia, many interviewees were also keen to stress that once access to services was obtained, little discrimination was faced based on gender, although interviews from micro-enterprise leaders opposed this, with stories of unequal distribution of revenue among men and women. Such gender differences were not discussed by German or Swiss interviewees. Changes in the types of drugs used by young people was also a running theme, highlighting the evolving nature of the issue. It is noteworthy that while recent spikes in drug use in the respective countries are due to different types of drugs, many of the underlying patterns and narratives are strikingly similar.

Each of the initiative case studies for this project shares the same fundamental mission: to facilitate the health, social development, and empowerment of marginalized youth. Karuna Drugstop explicitly focuses

on drug-affected youth, while the Transformative Impact Network and the Slum Peacepreneurship Project serve broader communities of marginalized youth, the majority of whom are drug-affected. Bateau Genève caters to a wider pool of marginalized individuals, including informal migrants and homeless people, some of whom are drug-affected. Reframing the identity of those being helped to counter societal stigma is a common strategy among the case studies. Initiatives like ABIC's Slumpreneurs label their participants as "Aspiring Youth," while Bateau Genève refers to its beneficiaries as "Passagers." This reframing helps to counteract prejudice and promote a positive self-identity among marginalized youth.

All four initiatives embody a foundational philosophy of providing support to all youth in a respectful and nonjudgmental manner, aiming to uplift rather than ostracize. In addition, all four initiatives invest resources into activities that help the youth to build a better future for themselves in a tangible and sustainable manner, though they differ in the particular activities of focus. Karuna Drugstop, and more specifically PEOPLE Berlin, focuses on creative expression through music and fashion design; the Transformative Impact Network prioritizes

education and creative expression; the Bateau Genève socio-professional reintegration and skill-building for employment; and the Slum Peacepreneurship Hubs trains youth on entrepreneurial training and peacebuilding.

The findings highlight the following factors as essential to the success of efforts to help youth rehabilitate from drug abuse: having dedicated rehabilitation or community centers available to go to; ensuring all social workers have a respectful and non-judgmental approach to the youth in order to build the trust needed to begin and sustain the rehabilitation; providing meaningful counseling throughout rehabilitation; incorporating learning new and practical skills into the core of the activities for the youth in order to equip them to reintegrate into society and build a good life for themselves going forward; providing long-term support as opposed to acute interventions. These factors are well spotlighted in the data by the fact that the social enterprise-based support initiatives, in Germany and Liberia, even with economic implications, maintain a policy of accepting individuals as they are, never banning them from accessing services. Many interviewees called for dedicated rehabilitation centers, but their effective-

ness depends heavily on their design and operation. These centers can sometimes become hubs for drug use if not properly managed and the location and framing of these centers are vital.

The importance of role models and mentors was also a recurring theme. In Liberia, youth leaders hold a powerful position, with marginalized youth ready to follow their lead at a moment's notice; at Bateau Genève, professional employees, as well as former successful interns, are a crucial influence for current interns. Notably, interviewees from both Ghana and Liberia not only commended the entrepreneurial activities hosted by initiatives, but also activities facilitating drug-affected youth to engage in politics, with a similar form of empowerment and inspiration emerging from activities related to youth involvement in politics than from entrepreneurial skills training. These points highlight the potential for using role models and mentors, including rehabilitated youth and high-level officials, as a part of the solution for drug-affected and marginalized youth.

A sense of purpose or something bigger than themselves was found to be a key motivator, though challenges exist in aligning

these grander purposes with practicalities of execution. Anecdotal examples from the findings, both in Western Europe and West Africa, show that while the initial drive is strong, the reality of the work required can be daunting without adequate support and resources. This issue also featured in the social enterprise-based initiatives, where one of the key barriers to the success of the enterprises was attrition.

Holistic approaches to reintegration emphasize viewing drug-affected youth as complete individuals rather than focusing solely on their addiction were prevalent in Western Europe, addressing not just the drug use but also the underlying issues such as education, skills development, and emotional well-being. Simple examples which are easily transferable, such as the Bateau Genève offering access to telecommunications and letter writing services, enable those seeking help to address other issues in their life (such as reaching out to family or engaging in current affairs). This in turn makes dealing with problem drug use or marginalization a more likely prospect.

Formation of networks that enable and enhance social reintegration support was distinctly appreciable in European initiatives.

They have developed extensive partnerships with local businesses, educational institutions, and community organizations to create a robust support system for those they support. Initiatives in Ghana and Liberia could benefit significantly from establishing similar networks, fostering collaborations that offer continuous and varied support to rehabilitated youth. By building strong local and international partnerships, these initiatives can enhance their capacity to support drug-affected youth more effectively and sustainably.

Switzerland stood out for its abundance of sports clubs, which was the only country commended for the sheer number of these associations. This extensive network provides numerous options for marginalized youth to engage in sports, which can be a powerful tool for reintegration. This model of providing a wide range of accessible activities could be beneficial if replicated in other regions; for example, in Liberia, many youth stated their strong willingness to be part of any sports club that would be fielded under the ABIC banner.



# Conclusion and Outlook

Our research attempts to shed light on the promising ways to empower and rehabilitate youth affected by drug addiction. Drug issues are driven by different factors and even different types of drugs, with the face of drug problems constantly evolving. Factors unique to each country, shaped by historical legacies, cultural norms, and socioeconomic realities, are made clear, such as in Liberia, where the lingering scars of civil war cast a long shadow over the landscape of drug addiction, with trauma of conflict fueling cycles of violence, poverty, and substance abuse, or Germany, where increased numbers of drug-affected youth come from more affluent socioeconomic backgrounds.

We also highlight shared challenges and structural factors that shape the landscape of drug addiction and rehabilitation in the four countries. In both West African countries, poverty was identified as a significant barrier to accessing rehabilitation services, exacerbating the cycle of addiction and hindering efforts towards recovery. Moreover, corruption emerged as a recurrent theme, albeit manifesting in distinct forms

within each context. While poverty may not be as pervasive in the Western European countries as in the West African contexts, marginalized communities in Europe still face significant hurdles in accessing adequate rehabilitation and support. Issues such as stigma surrounding addiction and limited resources for mental health services present challenges in Switzerland and Germany just as in Liberia and Ghana, albeit with nuanced differences.

Our investigation into the legal frameworks, drug use trends, and societal responses in Germany, Ghana, Liberia, and Switzerland reveals a multidimensional landscape of approaches to addressing drug addiction. Across these diverse contexts, there is a discernible shift towards more compassionate and public health-oriented policies, reflecting a growing recognition of addiction as a complex societal issue. While German, Ghana and Switzerland have enacted legislative reforms to prioritize rehabilitation and support, Liberia grapples with the enduring legacy of civil conflict amidst efforts to implement new initiatives. Switzerland's pioneering four-pillar approach underscores its commitment to evidence-based practices, yet emerging challenges such as online drug trafficking highlight the need



for ongoing adaptation and innovation in drug policy-making and implementation. While narratives have shifted, it was found that the political will and resources behind those narratives did not always align.

The diverse yet interconnected approaches of the four initiatives analyzed underscore a shared mission of supporting and empowering marginalized and drug-affected youth. By fostering a respectful and nonjudgmental environment, reframing identities to combat stigma, and focusing on holistic reintegration strategies, these initiatives demonstrate the importance of a comprehensive support system. The pivotal role of role models, the necessity of well-designed rehabilitation centers, and the creation of strong, supportive networks emerge as key elements that can be adapted and applied across different contexts. These findings highlight the potential for cross-regional learning and the transferability of successful practices, paving the way for more effective and sustainable support for marginalized and drug-affected youth globally.

It is important to acknowledge the limitations that have impacted the depth and scope of our findings. Firstly, we were unable to fully address certain research ques-

tions, such as the potential impact of long-term monitoring and evaluation mechanisms on the efficiency and sustainability of initiatives. This shortfall arises from the complexity of the topic, which necessitates a more focused exploration than our current research structure allowed. Similarly, our investigation into the specific impact of football initiatives as a tool for rehabilitation was hindered by difficulties in accessing relevant data and initiatives. This highlights the need for future research to adopt a more targeted approach, perhaps focusing solely on sports or specific rehabilitation programs to gather the necessary data and insights.

New opportunities arising from recent changes in drug policy frameworks may not have been fully assessed, with focus primarily on analyzing initiatives and understanding the situation of youth affected by drug addiction. Further exploration into how recent policy shifts may create opportunities or challenges for intervention efforts could be valuable for future research to explore in more depth. This could involve examining the alignment between policy objectives and on-the-ground implementation, as well as identifying potential gaps that could inform more targeted interventions.

Additionally, there were challenges in obtaining comprehensive interviews, particularly with key stakeholders such as policy-makers and high-level officials, as well as obtaining direct contact with marginalized youth in all countries, due to the sensitive nature of the topic and varying contexts across the countries. This restricted the breadth of perspectives captured in our research and may have influenced the depth of our analysis. Moreover, while our sample size was sufficient for our research objectives, increasing the number of interviews could have provided more robust data. However, it should be noted that this would have compromised the specificity of our conclusions and recommendations.

Future studies could delve deeper into the potential of sports structures as vehicles for rehabilitation. Research could explore how similar models might be implemented in different contexts, particularly in West Africa. Additionally, further research could examine whether the arts and creative expression, as emphasized by initiatives like Karuna Drugstop and TIN, can play a comparable role in rehabilitation. Exploring the therapeutic and developmental benefits of creative activities could uncover new avenues for supporting drug-affected youth, high-

lighting the broader applicability and adaptability of these approaches across diverse cultural and socio-economic landscapes.

By addressing these limitations and expanding on our findings, future research can contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of effective strategies for combating drug addiction and supporting affected individuals.



# Final Recommendations

Given the cross-national comparisons and the four initiatives we have highlighted, the implications and learnings will be compiled and summarized in this section, providing concrete recommendations for existing and future initiatives to support marginalized and at-risk youth in combating their drug addiction. Our limitations are outlined throughout these recommendations, highlighting specifically where future research could carry the work forward.

## I) Trust

From all four of our case studies, the very foundation of any engagement with drug-affected, marginalized, and at-risk youth is long-term commitment, as well as building respectful and trusting relationships. The youth ought to be met as people as opposed to being reduced to their drug addiction being an issue. They need to be welcomed and treated openly, allowing them to join the initiative in the capacity that they can bring at that point in time. Delivering on the promises made to the youth is key for

any initiative to gain traction, and be effective in aiding the youth.

## II) Economic Empowerment

Economic empowerment is critical in supporting at-risk youth to overcome addiction and reintegrate into society. Many of the initiatives we examined recognize that providing youth with the skills and opportunities to achieve financial independence is essential for their long-term recovery and social reintegration. This includes vocational training, entrepreneurship support, and creating pathways to employment, depending on local economic contexts.

Our findings highlight the success of initiatives that integrate economic empowerment into their programs. For example, the Slum Peacepreneurship Project in Liberia emphasizes training youth to develop entrepreneurial initiatives that address community challenges. By equipping young people with the tools to create their own businesses, this initiative not only fosters economic self-sufficiency but also encourages a sense of purpose and community engagement.

Similarly, Bateau Genève helps marginalized individuals, including drug-affected individuals, to build upon existing skills and find employment. By focusing on practical skill-building and providing access to job opportunities, the initiative supports youth in gaining the confidence and resources needed to break the cycle of addiction and marginalization

### **III) Role Models and Mentorship**

Throughout our analysis, a recurring theme was the importance of role models and peers who may inspire the youth to take part in an initiative and stay engaged. Mr. Norbert Schäfer phrased it nicely that the youth are isolated from broader society, but still form communities and may be deeply integrated among themselves, which can be a great leverage point in offering support. Youth leaders, formerly drug-affected youth, social entrepreneurs, and even if possible external actors such as sports stars, private sector actors, and higher-level officials could be involved with the youth through mentorship programs, guiding them on their way to their ambitions. The youth have further highlighted to us how much talent and expertise already exists within the communities that could be channeled

through mentorship or open workshops. Community members themselves might be supported in offering more informal training opportunities to youth within their communities, with the required local knowledge and already having a rapport with their peers.

### **IV) Multidisciplinary of Approaches**

Thirdly, a recommendation that emerged from our research is to integrate organizations and offerings to provide holistic support to the youth, reaching them at different levels and through various means. We found that affected youth are not always able to maintain efforts in support initiatives due to physical, mental, and emotional challenges. Hence, it is essential to provide a safety net to the youth when they are unable to stay engaged. This could be a safety net in the form of counseling that is directly combined with vocational training, or it could be through the mentorship program when a young person is always welcomed by the mentor. The safety net could also be a creative initiative, where there are no expectations to function perfectly or a sports club where the main focus is not on their addiction and everyone is treated equally on the field. In the recommendation of a holistic

approach, we also wish to include a note on rehabilitation centers. They may become hubs for drug use if not built at a remote location as ABIC is considering, and they need to be combined with broader supportive structures. Coupling rehabilitation with vocational training and continuous support, as seen in some European models, can make a significant difference. Centers that focus solely on abstinence without providing skills training or long-term support may fail to achieve sustainable recovery.

## **V) Breaking the Stigma**

To raise awareness and break stigmas and challenge how the youth are perceived by society, providing them with a platform to speak their minds and voice their demands is possible. This may be through creative means such as a theater, fashion design, or a sound studio as exemplified in our Ghanaian and German case studies. In Liberia, we learned how journalists are struggling to raise awareness on current issues as the youth do not wish their stories to potentially be exploited for profit. It could be an option to provide a press room to the youth, a safe space where they could share what they wish with broader society. Here they could be supported by journalists who might help

in the ideation, writing, and editing process, and the youth could choose to remain anonymous if reporting on more sensitive topics. It would allow the journalists to shed light on current issues in a more precise and safe manner, in direct collaboration with the youth who may gain visibility of their situation and communities. Additionally, a press room might help anyone trying to engage with the youth to understand the youth's wishes and challenges more profoundly, offering the possibility to cater offerings more effectively.

## **VI) Building Bridges**

While providing a safe space for youth is essential, it is also important to open pathways for reconnection with family members and peers with whom contact has been lost. Through our case study in Switzerland, we learned of the power of providing a space to write letters to loved ones, facilitating exchanges with family members and friends after longer periods of disconnection. The reconnection of families however found little space in our project overall, and this could be a starting point for future research. Furthermore, initiatives serve as a bridge back into broader society. Therefore, it is beneficial to build broader networks with

actors in broader society, academic institutions, private sector actors, and other organizations and initiatives. Connections to academic institutions are beneficial to those who wish to be re-integrated into the educational system, perhaps allowing them to take part but bounce back to consultation and support services with no greater repercussions when it is needed for their mental recovery. Private sector actors within the network can be anchor points for vocational training and opportunities for the youth who are starting to make their way out of addiction. Direct engagement with them throughout the recovery process allows for a greater understanding of where the youth are coming from and how they can best be supported. Other organizations might be consulted to exchange experiences, challenges, and ideas on how to address them and adapt processes, as is done by the Transformative Impact Network Ghana through the International Youth Exchange Conference, where they exchanged with German corresponding initiatives.

## **VII) Sports**

Sports may be employed within initiatives targeted at marginalized and at-risk youth to combat drug use, however as a more indirect vehicle to offer supporting structures.

Alternatively, sports clubs allow for integration of marginalized youth with broader society in a potentially less pressuring way, depending strongly on the level of professionalism. The power of sports lies within its non-judgmental nature, creating ties between team members, with common shared goals, and transferable skills such as ambition, dedication and consistency.

## **VIII) Gender-Specific Issues**

Throughout the research process, we learned that at-risk and marginalized women are affected in additional ways, including sexual violence, greater difficulties in accessing supportive resources, prostitution to afford drug use, and some existing rehabilitation centers mainly accepting men. Our research is skewed towards a greater number of male respondents, and there has been little differentiation between genders throughout our project, not delving deeper into specific issues that women face. Thus, this presents another potential avenue for future research.

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# Photos from Working Sessions





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