

Boom Festival: The Kosmicare Project

ARTUR SOARES DA SILVA, BOOM FESTIVAL TEAM



Held in Portugal every other year since 1997, the Boom Festival focuses on sustainability, knowledge, spirituality, psychedelic arts, music, and culture. Boom attracts people from around the world—43,000 people attended from 152 countries in 2014—on the shores of a magnificent lake. Due to Portugal’s forward-thinking 2001 decriminalization law, Boom has been developing an unique harm reduction and risk



“Humans possess the capacity to create a culture of caring and concern for people in distress. Helping people in crisis is intrinsic to the nurturing side of human character.”

—Hoff & Adamowski (1998)

 João Curiti

minimization project since 2002.

Portugal is a country with a vast history of intercontinental discovery, Inquisition, earthquakes, the birth of Brazil, national bankruptcies, beautiful beaches, great surfing, and a laid-back way of life. In 2001, against all odds and strong internal criticism,

a progressive drug decriminalization law was announced. It was the last attempt to solve a national epidemic of drug addiction during the 1980s and 1990s; a Eurobarometer survey conducted in 1997 showed that the Portuguese considered drug-related issues related to be the most important social problem in the

country. It has been estimated that 0.7% of the Portuguese population has used heroin at least once (the second highest rate in Europe), and HIV cases have skyrocketed.

The 2001 law decriminalized possession of all drugs for consumption as the most effective way to limit consumption and reduce the number of addicts. It encouraged and promoted prevention and education projects, including harm reduction, treatment programs, and activities that helped at-risk groups or drug users to restore their connections with family, work, and society. It was in this context that Boom Festival began developing our own harm reduction—Kosmicare (formerly CosmiKiva Sanctuary)—back in 2002.

The idea of a drug-free society is an illusion that will never come true. The same goes for festivals. Drug users report using drugs (alcohol included) for a large number of reasons: to address personal problems, recreation, pleasure, spiritual growth, transcendence, potentiating personal insights, getting in touch with their inner world, increasing creativity, and more.

There were two phases of harm reduction and risk minimization at Boom. The first ran from 2002 to 2008, focused on drug use at the festival itself. The second phase, which began in 2010, focuses not only on intervention at the festival but also with the scientific discovery and validation of harm reduction methods. It is also in 2010 that pivotal partnerships started taking place, showing how progressive laws in Portugal could help festival participants. In that year, Boom Festival signed a unique protocol that involved the Institute for Drugs and Drug Addiction (IDT), part of the Portuguese Ministry of Health and the Catholic University of Porto. The protocol's objectives were to improve intervention at the festival by maximizing resources and more effective liaisons with offsite health services. There was also a special effort to conduct scientific investigations in association with the University with the goal to transform Kosmicare into an evidence-based intervention model that could be disseminated to similar settings and populations.

Kosmicare now consists of a team of 40 people (psychiatrists, therapists, psychologists, homeopaths, therapists, and volunteers) working at the festival site in a central area with tipis, yurts, and a seating area. It has a drug testing service nearby one of the music areas where festival attendees can learn about the substances they have used or are considering using. The service also provides public alerts if necessary. The project also works in collaboration with the festival's in-house medical services (doctors, medics and nurses), with offsite health services (hospitals or health centers in the region) and security stewards.

Decriminalization in Portugal created a legal framework for the implementation of harm reduction policies, and the social reintegration and de-stigmatization of drugs and drug use. For consumers, decriminalization eliminates the fear of testing their substances and undergoing treatment. This approach is humanistic (i.e., a sick or in-crisis person needs help) and pragmatic (i.e., repressive measures have been ineffective in limiting consumption). Our experience at Boom Festival has been very positive in that we have been successful in not only helping

people avoid or process traumatic experiences, but also producing empirical data that can be used by any event organizer. 🌐

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