

NordAN

Nordic Alcohol and Drug Policy Network

World Health Organisation

Public hearing on global alcohol strategy

Contribution by NordAN October 2008

NordAN welcomes the decision by the World Health Assembly to develop a global strategy for prevention of alcohol related harm.

It is of great importance to the peoples of the world that WHO assumes the global leadership in this area. We thank the WHO for giving us the opportunity to contribute in this process.

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Question 1:

NordAN's views on effective strategies to reduce e alcohol-related harm:

In answering this general question, we refer to our alcohol policy platform, which was adopted by our assembly of representatives in Reykjavik 2007. In paragraphs 2-13 our general view on effective strategies are summarized:

1. Harm done by alcohol is a serious social welfare and health problem

Harm done by alcohol is one of the most serious threats to social welfare and health in the Nordic and Baltic states, in Europe and globally. Alcohol is estimated to be responsible for at least 12% of male and 2% of female premature death and disability in the European Union. Young people shoulder an even larger part of this burden, with around 25% of youth male mortality being due to alcohol. In EU countries, it is estimated that 16% of child maltreatment is due to alcohol, and that between 6 and 12% of the children live in families where drinking by parents has negative effects. (This first paragraph, which gives a background of alcohol related harm, is updated with new figures after the platform was adopted.)

2. Prevention is most important

It is more humane and efficient to prevent alcohol related harm, than to wait until it has occurred. Therefore, the most important task of alcohol policy is prevention. At the same time, those who have developed alcohol dependence or have been affected by other alcohol related harm, must be offered treatment based on science and experience.

3. The consumption of alcohol must be reduced and drinking patterns improved

There is a strong relationship between the total consumption of alcohol and the harm. But also drinking patterns, e.g. how alcohol is consumed at every occasion and the degree of intoxication, are important. The preventive alcohol policy therefore must strive both for reducing the total consumption and for reducing binge drinking. It is also important that alcohol is avoided during childhood and adolescence, during pregnancy, in road traffic, in boating, in connection with sports and in working life. General policies directed at the whole population are not in conflict with actions aimed at influencing special groups.

4. Price, reduced availability and age limits are the most efficient policy tools

A high price on alcohol, reduced availability and age limits are the most efficient instruments, both in reducing the total consumption and in reducing problem drinking. The policy of restrictions is supported by modern alcohol research as the most efficient preventive alcohol policy. Also local alcohol policy must include actions that affect the environment, like for instance regulation of the number of alcohol outlets, age controls, alcohol checks in road traffic, rules against consumption of alcohol in public places and requirements that organisations that are supported by public funds must keep their activities free from alcohol.

5. Information is important, alcohol advertising should be as limited as possible

Information about the effects and risks of alcohol is important, but can not replace restrictions on availability. Alcohol advertising, on the other hand, should be avoided as far as possible. The health of the population is more important than the freedom of the commercial actors. Alcohol information is an important task for the state and for local and regional bodies in health education, health care and social services. This information shall not be influenced by the commercial alcohol industry. Rules against alcohol advertising crossing national borders should be as strong as those against tobacco advertising.

6. Alcohol is a losing affair for society

The reason to have an alcohol policy is humanitarian, to prevent humans from being harmed. But also economic reasons speak in favour of reduction of alcohol consumption. Alcohol related problems cause great costs to society, both for care and for damage to property, and in the form of reduced production, due to illness, low productivity and premature death. All attempts to defend increased alcohol consumption with arguments of employment or export incomes must be rejected. The costs of alcohol problems are just as great if they are exported to other countries.

7. Alcohol free zones

Alcohol should be avoided during childhood and adolescence, during pregnancy, in working life and in connection with sports. Local communities, voluntary organisations and commercial enterprises should cooperate to create and maintain these alcohol free zones.

8. Alcohol free traffic

Road traffic must be entirely free from alcohol. Therefore strict legislation and a large number of random breath tests are needed. Drivers with alcohol problems should be offered care as part of the court decision. All cars should be equipped with alcohol locks, which prevent driving under the influence of alcohol. Driving motor boats should be covered by the same sobriety rules as driving a car.

9. Care should be financed by public bodies, but can be carried out by others

The government has a responsibility to ensure that all persons, who are dependent on alcohol or harmed in other ways, are offered the care that they need. The care should be financed by public funds, but can be carried out by different organisations, both official and voluntary, or by other private operators. The state should also give professional education to those who work with alcohol related problems in different caring environments, based on the best available scientific knowledge.

10. Schools have an important role in prevention

Information about alcohol and other drugs, properly adapted to the age of the students, is an important task for the schools. But much more important is that the schools offer their students a good working environment, where the young persons are seen and appreciated, and with a relaxed atmosphere and good order, that the cooperation with the homes works well, and that the school reacts immediately when a child is absent from school without a good cause. The school should also provide structured alcohol free leisure activities and good health care resources.

11. Alcohol research should be given increased resources

Free and independent research, which does not depend on money from the commercial alcohol industry, is important for the continued development of alcohol policy. Alcohol research should be given increased resources and should be cross disciplinary, with participation of researchers from social and behavioural sciences, medicine, economics, traffic research and other areas.

12. The influence of the commercial alcohol industry should be limited

The interest of the alcohol industry to increase sales and maximise profits for its owners is in conflict with the interest of society in good public health. Competition and private profit making interest are dynamic forces which lead to increased consumption and increased harm. This is a strong reason for keeping the commercial alcohol interests under control by public bodies, and not letting them influence alcohol policy. The state owned sales monopolies in several of the Nordic countries should be preserved and strengthened.

13. Strong voluntary organisations give good support to alcohol policy

An important part of preventing alcohol related harm and other social problems is to build strong voluntary organisations (NGOs=Non Governmental Organisations). Different popular movements offer alternatives to commercial enjoyment, which often is dominated by alcohol consumption. The temperance movement, and other citizen's organisations in the drug field, should be strengthened as a counterweight to the lobbying activities of the alcohol industry with its vast economic resources.

Question 2:

The best ways to reduce alcohol problems from a global perspective:

We think that a comprehensive alcohol policy is needed, which includes both population based measures and measures directed at risk groups and risky behaviour. The strategy should be evidence based. The book "Alcohol: No ordinary commodity" by an international group of prominent researchers led by Tom Babor gives a good summary of the scientific evidence of what are effective alcohol policies. In areas where the scientific evidence is not conclusive, it is important that actions taken are designed in a manner that will permit evaluation of their effects, in order to provide better knowledge for the future.

It is important that the strategy has a public health perspective and not a trade perspective. Unfortunately, the alcohol industry tends to oppose such policies that would reduce the consumption of alcohol, in spite of the fact that it is well known that there is a strong connection between total consumption of alcohol and harm. As long as this is the case, it is important that the bodies deciding on the alcohol strategy acknowledge that the commercial alcohol industry has interests that are in conflict with the interest of public health.

Obviously, alcohol is one of the important causes of ill health for persons who consume alcohol. But even more important is the harm caused by alcohol to other persons than the drinker. Alcohol is an important factor behind violence and accidents that harm others and millions of children in the world suffer from growing up in families with alcohol problems. Therefore, an alcohol policy based on solidarity is urgent both from a health point of view and to increase security and social well being of other persons than the drinker.

In the world of today, the effects of alcohol have to be taken into account in forming policies both on a local, a national, a regional and a global level. It is particularly important, that trade agreements and economic cooperation between nations are not arranged in a way that prevents the participating states from carrying out policies to reduce alcohol related harm.

In our view, a global strategy should include advice on important elements in an alcohol policy for local communities. It should also sum up what is known about efficient national policies. Naturally, the policy of each community and state has to take into account the cultural circumstances and the role of alcohol in each society. But cultural differences should not be used as an excuse to avoid measures that can have effect but are believed to be unpopular in the short run. Sometimes carrying out efficient alcohol policy requires political courage and persistence. But alcohol problems in many countries now have become so serious, that strong leadership is necessary.

The global strategy should recommend good minimum policies, but also encourage those states, who want to carry out more ambitious policies to do so. In our alcohol policy platform, referred to above, the two last paragraphs, 14 and 15, deal with the need for international and global cooperation:

14. The World Health Organisation needs support

The European Region of the WHO has adopted alcohol action plans that form a good base for preventive work. But the member states must give WHO-Europe increased resources to carry out the plans and to develop more knowledge and documentation in the field. The global WHO now has an important task to develop equally responsible and specific action plans for the world. A framework convention similar to the one on tobacco should be the long term goal.

15. Alcohol is no ordinary commodity

International trade agreements, for instance in the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and economic cooperation in the EU and the European Economic Area (EEA), should not treat alcohol as an ordinary commodity. Free trade with goods and services, which is desirable in general, must not be regulated in a manner that prevents those states, who so wish, to carry out an active alcohol policy. Therefore, the EU member states must be given the right to decide on the rules governing traveller allowances, gifts and post packages of alcohol, and to control that these rules are followed, to mention one example. The minimum tax rates on alcoholic beverages in the EU must be raised, and every member state must have the right to decide on higher taxes, without being subject to the pressure of border trade from countries with lower taxes. International agreements in the service area should not be worded in a manner that can be used to force a country to permit alcohol advertising against its national policy. Alcohol should be excluded from the coming agreement on trade in services (GATS). States and international organisations must cooperate against smuggling and other illegal activities concerning alcohol.

Question 3:

How can NordAN contribute to reducing alcohol related harm?

NordAN stands for the Nordic Alcohol and Drug Policy Network.

We are an umbrella of 88 voluntary organisations in the alcohol and drug field in the Nordic and Baltic States. Our member organisations represent a diversity of organisations that are involved in research, advocacy, education, training of care workers, treatment services, preventive youth work as well as information to the public.

One of our commitments is to strengthen the support for restrictive alcohol policies based on solidarity and scientific evidence in our member countries.

NordAN and our member organisations can represent the civil society in implementing a global strategy at the national and Nordic-Baltic regional level.

Through our website and newsletter we will collect and disseminate information about alcohol problems and efficient policies to the civil society in our region, and support voluntary organisations in their work for better preventive policies at all levels.

Summary of the NordAN contribution

The view of NordAN – the Nordic Alcohol and Drug Policy Network – on what constitutes a good preventive alcohol strategy in general and a global strategy in particular can be summarized in these points, based on our alcohol policy platform, adopted by representatives of our member organisations:

1: Harm done by alcohol is a serious social and health problem. Particularly important from a policy point of view is the harm caused to other persons than the drinker.

2: It is more humane to prevent harm than to wait until it has occurred. A comprehensive policy is needed, including both population based measures and action directed at risk groups and risky behaviour.

3: It is important both to reduce total consumption of alcohol and to influence drinking patterns, eg to avoid intoxication.

4: A high price on alcohol, reduced availability and age limits are the most efficient instruments, both in reducing total consumption and in reducing problems.

5: Information about the effects of alcohol is important, but can not replace restrictions.

6: Commercial alcohol advertising should be avoided as far as possible.

7: Alcohol is a losing affair economically for society. Alcohol related problems cause great costs. Attempts to defend increased drinking with arguments of employment or export incomes must be rejected.

8: Alcohol free zones: Alcohol should be avoided during childhood and adolescence, during pregnancy, in working life, in road traffic, in motor boats and in connection with sports.

9: Care should be financed by public bodies, but can be carried out by others.

10: Schools have an important role in prevention.

11: Alcohol research should be given increased resources.

12: It is important that the global strategy has a public health perspective and not a trade perspective. The influence of commercial alcohol industry should be limited, and the conflict between public health interests and the industry's goal to increase sales should be acknowledged.

13: Strong voluntary organisations give good support to alcohol policy. The WHO needs resources to promote implementation of global and regional strategies against alcohol problems.

14: Alcohol is no ordinary commodity, which should be taken into consideration when forming international trade agreements and rules for economic cooperation. States that want to carry out alcohol policies that are more ambitious than those agreed by economic or trade unions should not be prevented from doing so.

NordAN is a network of 88 voluntary organisations in the alcohol and drug field in the Nordic and Baltic States. We work to strengthen the support for restrictive alcohol policies based on solidarity and scientific evidence in our countries. Through our website and newsletter, and different meetings and conferences, we can spread knowledge about alcohol problems and efficient preventive policies, and support voluntary organisations in their work to obtain decisions on good policies and contribute to their implementation.