

Alcohol Policy Youth Network

Youth Empowerment for a better life!



Report on Cultural Realities and Differences in Alcohol Consumption



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Introduction

The Alcohol Policy Youth Network is a direct outcome of a series of political processes that continuously asked for higher youth participation in the definition, implementation and evaluation of policies and programmes tackling the harmful consumption of alcohol.

During our first Constitutive meeting that was held in March 2008 in Budapest we gave birth to the first ever all embracing youth network on Alcohol harm reduction and identified the working areas the future network would tackle, the needs that youth organizations must satisfy to be more involved in alcohol policy-making and its implementation, as well as developing the first action plan that has been revised and updated on last years' annual coordination meeting in Lisbon, Portugal.

This report is based on the outcomes of an online survey and following discussions by the participants of the European Conference on Alcohol and Young People, held in Budapest, Hungary, between the 7th and the 9th May 2010.

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Methodology

This report was developed as an integrated part of the European Conference on Alcohol and Young People, organized by APYN in the European Youth Centre in Budapest, Hungary, between the 7th and 9th May 2010.

The participants in the conference were invited to reply to an online survey and the outcomes of this survey served as a starting point for discussions in a workshop during the conference.

During the workshop participants were divided into working groups and asked to react to a number of statements in order to identify differences and similarities in the way young people in different countries react to similar situations. They were also invited to bring forth suggestions on how to address the identified problems or situations.

The outcomes of these discussions were then compiled into both the report of the conference and this report.

Outcomes

Based on the online survey, some topics were chosen to further discussion at the conference. Below, the main points from the discussions are stated, as well as suggestions on how to deal with the problems discussed.

1) “I wanna get drunk tonight, it’s gonna be so much fun!”

Similarities: This is a common attitude of young people in the present countries. Getting drunk is associated with having fun, socializing, doing “wild” things, positive experiences, getting relaxed etc.

Differences: The ways how and when to drink are different. In some countries (i.e. Portugal, Sweden...) you drink before you go out, in others (i.e. Georgia) you drink more in pubs. The consumption varies from country to country depending on prices as well.

Suggestions:

- Promote that fun is possible without alcohol as well
- Non-formal education by NGOs is very important. NGOs working on alcohol policy should have a strong opinion and avoid hypocrisy (i.e. having an alcohol project one week and go partying and drinking the next).
- Restrict alcohol advertisements that build up the expectation that drinking will be fun.
- Creating a counter-culture of non- drinking.
- Higher prices for alcohol products than for alcohol-free beverages.

Discussion:

Sofia, Portugal: “In Portugal people think it will be more fun to go out and drink. It is generally seen as a plus for a fun night.”

Lucas, Sweden: “I think it would be a good starting point if we could construct a counter culture to prove the point that you can have fun without alcohol as well. We have to address the topic from different angles: political, economical, cultural perspective etc.”

Egle, Lithuania: “There is a lack of good examples. It is important to have strong opinions instead of hypocrisy.”

Sanja, Macedonia: “Having fun, going out and alcohol is all about confidence. A lot of people use alcohol because they are not confident.”

Yiannis, Cyprus: “People always try to have fun, they do it in spite of the danger it may cause.”

2) *“I just had two beers, I can still drive...”*

Similarities: This attitude exists everywhere but it is commonly not accepted by society.

Differences: The awareness of the amount of alcohol that you can drink is different.

Suggestions:

- Public campaigns should highlight the issue.
- More controls and high fines for drunk driving.
- A zero drink-drive limit for under 21 drivers or zero-tolerance for all.

Discussion:

Atanas, Bulgaria: “In Bulgaria exists a public service that offers to give your car keys to a driver who drives you home for a small fee. I think it is a good example, it has lowered the harmful effects of being drunk.”

Sanja, Macedonia: “This may also lead to a bigger consumption if you know that you can get drunk and still get home.”

Rute, Portugal: “I think it is important to prevent the abuse of consumption, but also to prevent accidents. It might not be the best way to just find one person that doesn’t drink.”

Yiannis, Cyprus: “In Cyprus there will soon be a law for zero-tolerance for people under 21 because they are the ones to cause the most accidents.”

Jimmie, Sweden: “In Sweden in some cars people have to blow in a machine so that the car can start. If you had been caught drunk- driving more often, you can be forced to have an alcohol lock. Everyone should have that in their car.”

Johannes, Sweden: “Most public transportations in Sweden have those locks as well.”

Sofia, Portugal: “In Portugal most young people don’t have much information on how much they can drink to stay in the legal level. It is up to everyone. There should be a way for you to know for sure if you are able to drive.”

Sanja, Macedonia: “The best solution is to have a law to have a zero alcohol limit when you drive.”

Jan, Slovenia: “We all agree that there are projects that can solve the problems, but there is a need to prevent the problem. Drink- driving should not be acceptable at all.”

3) “Where I come from, alcohol is a part of my culture...”

Similarities: This is very common in all countries. There are traditional drinks or traditional occasions where people drink alcohol. For example in Sweden the Vikings are a big part of the history - there are traditional parties where people drink out of these helmets. In Slovenia alcohol is even mentioned in the national anthem. Homemade port wine is a big part of the culture in Portugal, etc.

Differences: There are different occasions of drinking like family gatherings, university drinking, holiday drinking etc. In some countries you even give your children alcohol to let them know what they are dealing with. This has a lot to do with peer pressure.

Suggestions:

- Stop the industry promoting alcohol as a part of culture.

Discussion:

James, Ireland: “This is a very challenging issue. In a lot of countries people have a long tradition of alcohol, they are even proud of their alcohol tradition. But we have to stress that there is no national tradition of being drunk!!”

Daša, Slovenia: “Culture is a changing concept. The laws could normalize drinking. Establishing good laws on where you can buy it, advertising etc. can have a deep impact on the general perception of alcohol.”

4) “Drinking helps me getting to know new people.”

Similarities: Drinking is perceived as a key factor to create new relationships as it makes people more comfortable and less shy.

Differences: Some countries do not consider alcohol as strengthening for relationships or maybe only on short term.

Suggestions:

- To create parties without alcohol to provide alternatives. People often drink when they are bored.
- Raising awareness that drinking alcohol can also finish a relationship. Promote that “sober” relationships are more real and more fulfilling. Maybe you can meet a person over a few beers, but that does not mean that it is a long-term relationship.

Discussion:

Ingunn, Norway: “It might also be the social setting that helps you meet people, not the alcohol itself. It’s the setting that makes you social, not the drink!”

5) “I’m gonna get drunk because I wanna get laid...”

Similarities: People take alcohol as an excuse for not taking responsibility for their choices. It is also a strategy to seduce someone more easily. Alcohol can make people more relaxed, however, that is generally used an excuse than a reason. If you get drunk you might get laid against your will. There is also the danger that people do not think about the risk when they are drunk, forget condoms etc.

Differences: There are cultural differences on the attitude towards having one night stands.

It is also a gender issue - girls with this behavior are not socially accepted, in comparison to guys. In some (southern) countries people are more comfortable with flirting sober during the day on the streets as well so they don’t have such a strong need to do it only drunk at night.

Suggestions:

- Promote the common knowledge that sexual performance is poor when you are drunk and the risk of sexual diseases, getting pregnant etc. is higher

Discussion:

James, Ireland: “The point of a poor sexual performance when drunk can be advertised very well. Telling people that having sex when drunk is not going to be such a big pleasure works better than telling them about the health impact.”

6) “Getting drunk once in a while can’t do any harm...”

Similarities: People do not think of consequences, drinking is socially accepted in all of the countries represented.

Differences: “Once in a while” has different meanings in every country.

Suggestions:

- Deconstruct the image of fun = alcohol
- Stress the importance of Non Formal Education in tackling alcohol abuse.

Discussion:

Daša, Slovenia: “There are different areas of harm, not only health wise, also socially; we have to inform people about those different effects. It is important to give information on immediate consequences, social effects etc. through the method of non-formal education.

Rute, Portugal: “I think it would be good to work with teachers and give them the competences to work with young people, to develop the self-confidence of these youngsters.”

Lucas, Sweden: “This behavior of occasional drinking causes even more problems; it creates a culture of alcohol. The “total consumption model” says that even if only a small percentage of the society is addicted to alcohol, the cost for these people is even bigger. The danger to yourself and society is bigger from that group than from the group of addicts.”

Conclusion

Reduction in total consumption of alcohol within a population will lead to less alcohol related harm. Effective measures on how to reduce alcohol related harm is listed in the book “Alcohol - no ordinary commodity”.

However, as this report is stating, there are cultural differences in drinking patterns, general opinions, realities and in laws and regulations concerning alcohol. These differences cannot be ignored when dealing with alcohol related issues, as actions might not have effect or be adopted by the population.

Therefore, in addition to information and knowledge about right approach and right actions, we need to be aware of the cultural realities in the country we want to plan an action.

A final suggestion made by the conference is not to have a global approach to tackle alcohol related problems, but to adopt these to the cultural reality in which you want to implement a project. Countries should also share best practices, ideas and experiences in order to find the best way of tackling the problems related with alcohol.