

Alcohol Policy and the Civil Society

Honourable Ministers, ladies and gentlemen, dear colleagues!

I am very grateful to have the possibility to speak to you this morning and I am sure we will have interesting presentations and a fruitful discussion.

Ladies and gentlemen

Alcohol is one of the major causes of ill health, health care contacts and premature death all over Europe. Every year 42.000 people die on average only in Germany, because of alcohol consumption - directly as a consequence of alcohol misuse or indirectly in a car accident caused by a drunken driver. "Mental and behavioural disorders due to use of alcohol" is the most frequent diagnosis for hospital admission of men in Germany.

I don't want to go into detail of alcohol epidemiology, consumption patterns or the different European addiction treatment systems, as I think the problems of alcohol consumption and its harmful effects are very familiar to everybody here present. I would rather focus on how we can prevent the harms done by alcohol and which role the civil society plays in this context.

Many European countries have a long tradition of wine, beer or spirits production. Alcohol consumption is a normal part of social life, - some times too normal, as often you have to apologize for not-drinking alcohol while drinking much is looked upon as an associational activity and the person who can do with a lot of drinks is appreciated a "hell of a guy". Young people influenced by skilful advertisings think of "drinks" as an attractive product closely connected with a glamorous lifestyle. Therefore it is not surprising that alcohol producers find it easy to persuade people of the prominence of this "cultural product". Furthermore the selling and export of alcohol is of some importance in the European economy.

So we have to face a strong alcohol lobby in the political field.

What we need is a comprehensive alcohol policy with clear objectives, strategies and targets. Some European countries, as e.g. Sweden and lately France (- pioneering labelling), lead the way to a strict alcohol policy, and are successful. Alcohol consumption in these countries decreased and for this reason the alcohol related harms were going down as well. Other countries, as for example Germany, have some good laws, but the enforcement fails very often. Others again are only at the initial point.

Let me stay for a moment with the harms done by alcohol, from an economic point of view which we should not neglect. We observe that health care costs are constantly rising and it is clear that we have to control these expenditures. There are several ways to contain health care costs, but one of the most efficient ways is to prevent people from damaging their health by smoking and by using alcohol in a harmful way.

During the last 10 years struggles had to be fought to put alcohol on the agenda. The initiatives of WHO and the European Commission were very supportive. There is a broad agreement between experts and health politicians about the effective measures to reach that goal: it is structural interventions like increases of taxes for alcoholic beverages, regulation of availability of alcohol and statutory regulation for alcohol advertising.

But what can we - as health professionals and representatives of NGOs - do? What is our role in society and politics?

First of all, our position has to be a professional position. We are the experts in health. We know the problems from scientific research and from our professional practice. Our interest is strictly referring to the implementation of the best and most cost effective interventions in order to save lives, and enable people to live a long and healthy life.

Second. We know people stick to their habits and are quite reluctant to change them once they are confirmed. This is also true for consumption patterns and for the way people judge the role of alcohol in their lives. Some of the necessary measures the European governments will have to adopt, if harm done by alcohol shall be reduced, will not be very well accepted by the public. This puts political parties under considerable strain, as they want to be elected.

Let me cite at this point a passage from an alcohol advocacy course I participated in. "In an ideal world, governments would always try to act in the best interest of the population, carefully weigh the effects of their policies and actions, and choose those most likely to contribute to the public good. In the more realistic scenario of our countries, NGOs and individuals encourage governments to act in the public interest, and support them so as to increase the chances of the government adopting positive policies and programs that might not be accepted easily."

This means our role is twofold: one the one hand we must inform the public about alcohol, the alcohol related health risks, and about harms for third parties caused by alcohol related traffic accidents, by alcohol related violence and the consequences for the mental development of children living in families with alcohol problems which are often leading again to alcohol addiction.

On the other hand we have to convince our governments of the benefits of an alcohol policy which takes into account the health perspective. This approach will also be favourable for the economy as it helps to reduce the financial burden of health care provision, the absenteeism at the workplace, police interventions, prison stays, expenditures of insurances, and many other costs. Our task is to prepare the ground in the public opinion for governmental initiatives.