

Alcohol Policy Conference in Bulgaria

By Walter Farke

The first Bulgarian conference on alcohol policy took place in Sofia on the 9th June 2008. The conference was organised as part of the Building Capacity project by the Bulgarian member of Eurocare and the APN, Horizonti 21.

The conference brought together sixty representatives from governmental and non-governmental organisations; it marked the beginning of an effort to build up a national network on alcohol policy in Bulgaria.

The journalists present at the press conference that preceded the event, showed a special interest in the data about alcohol consumption and alcohol related harm in Bulgaria.

During the conference Gabriele Bartsch and Walter Farke (DHS) highlighted the importance of the role of civil society in the development and implementation of alcohol policies and presented the elements of an effective alcohol strategy. Ruth Ruiz (Eurocare) gave an overview of EU Alcohol policy and spoke about the role of Eurocare. Malen Malenov (Horizonti 21) presented the results of the ELSA project. The picture was completed by presentations of national data and ESPAD data by Momchil Vassilev (National Focal Point of Drug and Drug Addiction) as well as data of alcohol related road accidents presented by Krassimir Kostov (National Police Department).

The following day Horizonti 21 organised a meeting for NGOs and representatives of public and governmental institutions. One representative from the Bulgarian Brewers Association was also invited because the brewers are involved in the development of the national alcohol strategy. The discussion during this meeting was focussed on a draft of the conference conclusions on effective alcohol policy. The discussion was very constructive and identified, amongst other things, the deficits in communication and cooperation between NGOs and the Government. At the end of the meeting the representatives from Eurocare and DHS emphasised the importance of setting up a network of NGOs and public health experts working together on alcohol policy matters. However they felt that that such network should be independent from the alcohol industry, given the wide discrepancies in objectives. Nevertheless it can be helpful to support the communication between all stakeholders under the chairmanship of the government (e.g. Ministry of Health).

Outlook

Horizonti 21 has planned further national network meetings. The continuation of this process depends now on the motivation and resources of the interested organisations. It is very positive that NGOs which are not directly linked to alcohol issue are now involved in such a process. At the end of 2009 the outcome of this initiative will be evaluated. First results will be presented during the Stockholm Conference in 2009.