

Report on the Alcohol Policy Conference in Thessaloniki, Greece

By Walter Farke

The second national conference in the scope of the country visits took place in Thessaloniki, Greece on the 30th September 2009. The content of the conference was focussed on strategies to cope with alcohol related problems. The conference was planned and carried out by the *Hellenic Society for the Study of Addictive Substances* in cooperation with the *German Centre for Addiction Issues (DHS)*.

The Presentations of national and international speakers gave more than 100 participants an insight into recent developments in European Alcohol Policy as well as national activities in the field of prevention in Greece. The official opening of the event was done by representatives of the *Aristotle University Thessaloniki* as well as by local and regional politicians. After that Dr. Lars Möller of the *WHO Regional Office for Europe* opened up the line of lectures. He reported on the role of the WHO in European Alcohol Policy and outlined the effectiveness of Alcohol Policy measures to reduce alcohol related harm. Afterwards Marjatta Montonen from the *Directorate-General for Health and Consumers (DG SANCO)* reported in the main elements and aims of the European Alcohol Strategy. She showed how important national commitment for the success of the European Strategy will be. Prof. Ioannis Diakogiannis from the *Hellenic Society for the Study of Addictive Substances* resumed, that further dedication towards Alcohol Policy is needed in Greece. Prof. Thomas Paparrigopoulos outlined the current state of the development of the Greek national strategy on alcohol. National speakers have done several presentations, which were focussed on addiction treatment and education programs in the field of alcohol prevention. Further speakers with an international background were Mariann Skar of *EUROCARE*, Sven-Olov Carlson of *IOGT-NTO* and Walter Farke of the *German Centre for Addiction Issues (DHS)*. After the Lectures the Participants were invited to discuss several issues of the presented topics.

Very successful was the media coverage of the conference. The Greek representatives of the *Hellenic Society for the Study of Addictive Substances* gave several interviews to regional and national Radio and TV stations. Newspapers reported also of the conference.

Outlook

Among Greek organisations exists great interest in the implementation of national concepts and strategies on alcohol policy issues. The increase in binge drinking among young people in Greece, which has been identified in national and international studies, calls for action. This trend of excessive alcohol consumption among young people in a Mediterranean country aligns with the general trend in Europe. Furthermore, a need to optimize the supply system in the field of addiction treatment has been identified in the Greek health care system. With regard to prevention programs, it was stressed that most of the activities in Greece are focussed on changing behaviour of the target groups. On the other hand there is a lack of information about the effectiveness alcohol policy measures, which regulate the availability of alcoholic beverages and measures, which support the reduction of harm in drinking and surrounding environments. The conference has been contributed to start closing these gaps. A lot of activities in Greece aim at policies, which reduce drinking and driving. In this scope most of the projects are based on the designated driver concept and are funded by the alcohol industries partly as well as mainly. This practice has been observed all over Europe.

At present, a network of NGOs dedicated on alcohol policy is still lacking in Greece. The conference was the first step to prepare the ground for further actions in the alcohol policy

field in Greece. The *Hellenic Society for the Study of Addictive Substances* could play an important role by building up structures, which support the implementation of effective alcohol policy measures. External support by different players and networks will be necessary to accompany this process. It was agreed with the *Hellenic Society for the Study of Addictive Substances* that after the conclusion of the Building Capacity Project an alcohol advocacy course will be conducted in Greece. The overall outcome of the conference left a positive impression, because it encouraged the participants to further activities and cooperation in the field of alcohol policy and generated ample media coverage.