

NORDAN STATEMENT ON YOUTH DRINKING

The NordAN conference 2016, Oslo, Norway, October 15 – 16 discussed the topic of Alcohol and Young People and arrived at the following observations and conclusions:

- 1. The recent European large scale surveys among young people (such as ESPAD and HBSCS) show a tendency towards decreasing alcohol consumption among young people.
- 2. There are a number of possible explanations for this phenomenon; however there is currently no full consensus amongst researchers about the principal drivers and it is assumed that a combination of factors is causing this. It is however likely to be also a result of the many alcohol control efforts that have been undertaken in many countries and internationally.
- 3. Amongst the other factors which may explain this positive trend that were discussed figured: an increased interest in healthy lifestyles amongst young people, a steadily increasing offer to young people for leisure time and entertainment without alcohol, a young generation with an interest in 'performing' in society, regulatory measures and legislation restricting the availability of alcohol to young people, a growing proportion of young people with a Muslim background, the economic crisis, higher awareness among young people, their parents and the general population of the risks associated with drinking et cetera.
- 4. While this generally positive phenomenon is taking place there is growing concern over high numbers (and in a number of countries evidence for increase in these numbers) of young people admitted to emergency departments of hospitals in connection with acute alcohol poisoning as a result of binge drinking or as a result of violence and accidents with alcohol as a causative or facilitating factor.
- 5. Despite the positive general trend socio economic differences remain and for some high risk groups (such as unemployed young people or dropouts, children growing up in families with an alcoholic, or in otherwise precarious environments) drinking continues to be a great threat to their development, health and well-being.

- 6. There is further the worrying expansion of internet based promotion of alcoholic beverages which is particularly attractive for young people. So far only Finland has taken legislative measures to control this form of marketing. Another worrying trend in this connection is the increasing efforts of the industry to target women, and in particular young women, who according to recent findings now drink nearly as much as young men.
- 7. A reduction in drinking among young people is important too in view of recent research findings on brain development and on stimuli influencing specific behavioural patterns in young people indicating that alcohol consumption for them entails significant extra risks in comparison with adults.
- 8. The Stockholm Declaration which was endorsed at the end of the WHO Ministerial conference in 2001 in Stockholm still provides valuable guidance for policy and action at regional European, at country and at community level. In particular the position that 'Public health policies concerning alcohol need to be formulated by public health interests without interference from commercial interests' is to be kept upright in the face of current massive investments by the industry to obtain access in to alcohol policy developments processes.
- 9. Further, the policy and recommendations for action to be taken at country and community level as laid down in WHO's Global Strategy to Reduce Harmful Use of Alcohol which were endorsed at the World Health Assembly in 2010 provide a clear and straightforward agenda for governments and NGO's over how to address efficiently and effectively alcohol related harm.
- 10. Strong international frameworks for action in this field (as provided for in the above mentioned WHO positions and in the UN Sustainable Development Goals) are needed to keep policy development going in the right direction. Steps towards strengthening the WHO international framework - such as provided for in the tobacco field by the FCTC - need full support.
- 11. In the health and welfare sector improving early detection and short interventions need further investments, and often better cooperation between health and welfare and law enforcements sector is needed.
- 12. In many communities practical activities towards declining alcohol related harm are possible by investing more in young people, promote their well-being, support recreational opportunities for them, in general invest in their healthy development.
- 13. As part of the overall movement of reducing alcohol related harm it is important to work towards an attitude in the general population which integrates alcohol abstinence as a desirable 'brand'.

The Oslo conference outcome paper was prepared by Cees Goos with the input from NordAN board members.