



Position Paper on Alcohol Related Harm

*Adopted by the Council of Members/ Extraordinary General
Assembly 27-28 April 2007, Baku (Azerbaijan)*

1. Executive Summary

Alcohol related harm is an important health and, in particular, social issue for young people. Unfortunately, youth are often depicted as simply a social group misusing alcohol rather than individuals capable of making conscious choices and sometimes the victims of alcohol-related harm. Moreover, youth could also be potential actors who could contribute to addressing alcohol-related issues. In this regard, youth organisations can play an important role through awareness-raising, by providing alternative leisure time activities for youth, as well as by being the space where young people can develop their social and personal skills. As these policies often affect young people, interested youth organisations should also be involved and have a say in the policy-making.

2. Introduction

2.1 Context

While important to everyone, certain health and social issues are often of particular importance to some segments of society, such as young people. For example, young people are likely to be more susceptible to certain health threats or more affected by particular social problems, but, if supported and given the right information and assistance they can address these issues early in life.

In this regard, youth organisations have an important role to play in social inclusion and health policy-making. Following this, the European Youth Forum (YFJ) and its Member Organisations (MOs) have for years played an active role in the area of social policies. A clear example of an issue which is of particular concern to youth is alcohol related harm. This is the reason why the YFJ convened a Working Group on alcohol policy in 2006, whose work also laid the foundation for this Position Paper.

2.2 Aim and Objectives

The European Youth Forum strives for policies that promote the autonomy and well-being of young people. The aim of this paper is to provide a further contribution to the holistic approach of developing such policies while addressing the question of alcohol related harm.¹

A core value for the YFJ, is that young people should be involved and have a say on all policies that affect them; thus, instead of only discussing policies related to alcohol and youth, young people should be involved in setting the agenda of alcohol policy and be able to express their views on the role of alcohol in their daily lives. This relates to the objectives of this paper which are to look into the role that youth organisations can play, and to provide a contribution to the current debate on youth and alcohol policy in Europe. Like international discussions on the topic, this paper deals both with recommendations for the national and European level.

¹ This Position Paper should be read in the context of the larger work done by the YFJ in relation to Health, Social Inclusion, Youth Autonomy, Sustainable Development, Youth Policy etc. See for example 0052-04 Policy Paper on Youth Autonomy, April 2004; European Youth Forum Policy on Young People and Social Exclusion, November 1999; 0182-06 European Youth Forum Policy Paper on Sustainable Development, April 2006; and 0070-06 European Youth Forum Policy Paper on Social Inclusion through Youth Participation, April 2006.

3. Background

3.1 Alcohol and Youth

Alcohol, if consumed sensibly, can be a positive aspect in life. It also represents a cultural value for several regions of Europe. However, when abused, it can destroy lives and families, and lead to social exclusion and marginalisation. Europe is not only the heaviest drinking region in the world², but alcohol abuse is also one of the highest risk factors for ill-health on the continent.³ Moreover, international research confirms that heavy and frequent drinking when young can lead to a greater onset of alcohol dependence in later life.⁴ Young people are, furthermore, particularly susceptible to the risks posed by alcohol use, with more than 10% of youth female mortality and around 25% of youth male mortality caused by alcohol. In addition to these direct risks, young people are also often the victims of the secondary effects of alcohol abuse - i.e. harm caused through the misuse of alcohol by parents/legal guardians, young peers as well as others (e.g. violence, drink-driving, broken families, and domestic violence).⁵

3.2 Political Framework

Consequently, a particular regard is often given to youth in policy-documents relating to alcohol on both the national and international level. Examples of the latter are the European Council recommendations on the drinking of alcohol by young people⁶, the European Commission strategy to support Member States in reducing alcohol related harm⁷, as well as the 2001 WHO Ministerial Conference on Young People and Alcohol⁸. In the case of the latter, the conference also included a parallel youth convention advising the ministers on the recommendations.

4. Policy Recommendations

On all levels of policy-making relating to alcohol and young people, there is a need to involve youth in order to achieve policies that correspond to their real needs. If not, there is a risk of further policies that depict young people solely in a negative way: as a social group simply misusing alcohol rather than individuals capable of making conscious choices and sometimes the victims of alcohol-related harm, or actors who could potentially contribute to addressing alcohol-related issues. Such a portrayal fails to consider that alcohol misuse is prevalent throughout societies and does not discriminate against age. It also neglects the fact that the attitudes young people hold towards alcohol and alcohol consumption are often inherited from adults.⁹ In the formulation of legislation and policy, the fact that alcohol misuse is an intergenerational problem must be considered.

² Both the European per capita consumption and the disease burden from alcohol are twice the world average (WHO. 2005).

³ For example, in the EU, alcohol is the third highest of twenty-six risk factors for ill-health - only behind tobacco and high blood pressure. (Anderson, P. & Baumberg, B.).

⁴ For example, young people who begin drinking before the age of 15 are 4 times more likely to develop alcohol problems than those who begin drinking at 21 (Anderson, P. & Baumberg, B). Adolescent binge drinking is of particular importance in this regard.

⁵ Anderson, P. & Baumberg, B. (2006) Alcohol in Europe. London: Institute of Alcohol Studies

⁶ See <http://europa.eu/scadplus/leg/en/cha/c11564.htm> for more information

⁷ See http://ec.europa.eu/health/ph_determinants/life_style/alcohol/alcohol_com_en.htm for more information.

⁸ See http://www.euro.who.int/alcoholdrugs/policy/20020611_1 for more information.

⁹ Anderson, P. & Baumberg, B. (2006) Alcohol in Europe. London : IAS

As a result, long-term approaches to address the problem are required, and young people, through youth organisations, should be involved in the formulation and implementation of public policy on alcohol and other issues which affect them. As a European platform the European Youth Forum can, together with interested Member Organisations, keep track of and participate in the policy-making discussions on the international level. Much of the recommendations and discussions carried out in for example the EU and WHO are, however, related to actions on the local and national level. Consequently, actions are needed at all levels, including regional and local. Below follows a discussion on some issues of particular concern.

4.1 Empowering young people to make responsible choices

A key aim of alcohol policy, for the European Youth Forum, is the empowerment of young people to make responsible and healthy choices when it comes to the use of alcohol. Young people often live within cultures where heavy drinking is encouraged and glamorised. In order to make responsible and healthy choices young people need to be informed, have strong self-esteem, and the possibility of alternative ways of spending their leisure time and having fun. Public policies should be geared towards supporting young people in this regard while striving for the emergence of a culture where young peoples' right to choose not to use alcohol or use alcohol responsibly is respected.

4.2 Changing the image of alcohol use

One of the key actions necessary to empower and support young people in making responsible and healthy choices is a change in the image of alcohol use. The image of alcohol use can be tackled from different angles by positive means through not only raising awareness on alcohol related harm but actively changing public perceptions of alcohol, through innovative ways. In this regard, the impact of alcohol promotion and marketing in different ways should also be considered. The promotion and marketing of alcohol reinforces the current image of alcohol and is often directly or indirectly targeted towards young people. In order for young people to make informed decisions, restrictions on alcohol marketing should be put in place and enforced.

4.3 Protecting young people from alcohol abuse by others

Alcohol related harm does not only concern the alcohol consumer, but also people in their immediate surroundings, as well as society as a whole. In this regard, all young people should be protected not only from the harm that can be directly caused to them by alcohol, but also indirectly. This concerns children and youth affected by domestic violence, peer violence, violence in public places, drink-driving, broken families, etc. Support should be provided to the victims, laws need to be properly enforced, and prevention should be given through a variety of measures. Examples of such are awareness raising, counselling, provision of more public transportation during night, reintegration into society of people with alcohol problems, and provide shelters for the ones in acute need of a safe environment.

Some of the greatest damage caused by alcohol is that to children of addicted parents. These children and young people are often forced to take responsibility for their parents or family, thus neglecting their studies and personal lives. The social and emotional effects of growing up with addicted parents are often enormous. No one should be forced to grow up in such an environment. Therefore, governments must assure that these children and young people are identified and that effective help is provided to them and their families.

5. The Role of Youth Organisations

Many youth organisations working in countries significantly affected by alcohol misuse play an important role in influencing public policy to prevent and reduce alcohol-related harm among young people. Moreover, a significant number of other youth organisations have the potential to do the same as they reach out to such a large part of the young population in Europe. Through the activities and programmes youth organisations run, they also contribute to the empowerment and healthy lifestyles of young people. The European Youth Forum will make sure that this role is taken into account in international policy making and that interested youth organisations can take part in these processes.

5.1 Education & Training, the Role of Non-Formal Education

Youth organisations provide a very important space in which young people can develop their social and personal skills. Young people learn much from the young person next to them which is why peer learning and youth organisations in general can play an important role in assisting young people to develop self-confidence to make informed choices and develop a responsible attitude. Just as negative peer pressure can lead to young people consuming excessive amounts of alcohol, positive peer pressure from within youth organisations can facilitate the development and enhancement of personal skills and self confidence amongst young people. As youth organisations are environments which provide alternative leisure time activities for young people, they contribute to prevention. Thus, youth organisations should be enabled, if they wish, to play an integral part in preventing and reducing alcohol-related harm amongst young people.

Moreover, non-formal education on alcohol misuse is one aspect of the work that not only specialised health agencies, but also youth organisations can deliver. However, it is important to note that such education is only effective as part of a multi-faceted approach to combating alcohol-related harm and on its own is not effective in reducing alcohol related harm. To support the work of youth organisations on alcohol related harm, programmes could be put in place to empower young people and youth workers with methodologies, information, and techniques on how to deal with alcohol abuse. Such initiatives should be supported by sufficient financing on the national and European levels.

5.2 Participation

Youth organisations can serve a significant function in many respects, such as raising awareness within families or in society in general, on how to tackle the stigmatisation of alcoholism/alcohol dependence. They can be a bridge, promoting awareness campaigns and meetings in schools between parents and children. Youth NGOs could have the opportunity to play a role in the reintegration of victims of abuse by providing places for young people to participate actively and be integrated into society.

Moreover, being democratic youth-led structures, interested youth organisations should have a say on alcohol policy, and are an important forum for discussing issues. This relates not only to the general public, but also within the organisations themselves, as they are an important space in which young people, through non-formal education methodologies, learn about their responsibilities and how to face these and other related issues. Moreover, an internal discussion on the issues might benefit members that may themselves be affected by problems of alcohol related harm.

While youth organisations provide a space for young people to participate and have fun in a safe and educational environment, they also have a responsibility to be conscious that their activities truly provide an alternative for alcohol misuse. This is even more important considering that European societies are increasingly multicultural and alcohol use is not part of all cultures. Choosing *not* to use alcohol should not lead to the exclusion of young people from participating from youth activities. In this regard capacity building on how to tackle or avoid the use of alcohol in youth activities should be provided.

6. Conclusion

The formulation and implementation of policies related to alcohol abuse and alcohol related harm require the involvement of young people, just as much as young people need effective policies. Youth organisations have a role to play in the formulation of these public policies at both European and national levels. Moreover, youth organisations play an important role with young people in capacity-building, awareness-raising, and influencing their lifestyle choices. This, however, requires that youth organisations which work with young people have the financial resources and support to deliver. Young people need to be supported in order to be able to make informed choices, while ensuring that others, and public authorities in particular, put in place policies and measures to address the problems and consequences of alcohol abuse and alcohol related harm.