

EU Alcohol Strategy - is the glass half full or half empty?

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The Globe, 2006, Issue 3

There was a mixed reaction to the appearance of the long awaited European Union Alcohol Harm Reduction Strategy in October 2006, the alcohol industry being rather more enthusiastic in its response than most were most public health and alcohol problems agencies. Some accused the European Commission of having sold out to the alcohol industry.

The industry's more positive reaction was unsurprising given that it had mounted one of the most aggressive lobbying campaigns ever known in the Union in relation to a public health policy and for a time it even seemed possible that the industry would succeed in blocking the Alcohol Strategy altogether. In the event the industry clearly believed that it had succeeded in converting the Strategy from being a threat to its interests to providing an opportunity for it to cultivate its image as socially responsible.

Speaking for the beer industry, Rudolphe de Looz Corswarem, secretary-general of the Brewers of Europe, welcomed the Strategy, saying that, while most people consumed alcohol sensibly, the EU had a role to play in pointing out that its misuse could affect health and relationships. The EU could also help, he said, in the take-up of "best practices", assist in the provision of full information concerning alcohol abuse and support an educational programme. "We're ready to play our role and that's our message".

The wine industry, represented by the Committee Européen des Entreprises Vins (CEEV), said it too would "take a leadership role in promoting moderation and responsibility in the consumption of wines, contribute towards preventing abusive and/or excessive consumption of alcoholic drinks, and co-operate effectively with the competent authorities and other relevant stakeholders in the prevention of abuse or misuse of wine".

George Sandeman of Sogrape Vinhos, chairman of the CEEV's working group on wine and health, said the committee was "convinced that there is a business case for a healthy Europe and that wine is a part of it".

Jose Ramon Fernandez, secretary general of CEEV, said that wine producers would launch a plan early 2007 "to work with local authorities and stakeholders to carry out broad-based education on the effects of moderate consumption of wine". He welcomed Brussels' "significant" acknowledgement of the role of widespread education and information regarding the impact of harmful alcohol consumption and its acceptance that there were big cultural differences in drinking patterns throughout the EU.

In the UK, Wine & Spirit Trade Association chief executive Jeremy Beadles congratulated the European Commission for recognising “both that the issue is not alcohol itself but addressing misuse and harmful drinking behaviour by consumers and that there are different cultural habits related to alcohol consumption in the various member states.”

He continued: “We are particularly pleased to see that the Communication has no specific plans related to alcohol taxation or product labelling and recognises the importance of joint industry - government work at a national level. Officials in DG Sanco, the EU Health and Consumer Protection Directorate General, have obviously listened to our concerns in these areas.

"It is clear that the Commission does not intend to implement the strategy through specific new legislative proposals, but rather by encouraging member states to take action at a local level on a number of priority alcohol-related themes, including young people and children, road accidents and impact of alcohol misuse on the workplace.

"We support the European Commission's view that information, education and awareness campaigns and agree that there is a need for better and more standardised data.

"The Communication also reflects the increasing efforts of those working in the trade to improve consumer education on all aspects of alcohol."

The trade newspaper The Publican put it more succinctly: its headline said simply ‘Alcohol strategy for Europe averted’.

NGO

response

Public health specialist Dr. Peter Anderson, co-author of the report ‘Alcohol in Europe’, stated “The alcohol industry has lobbied to put their own profits above the needs of the European people, with commission officials other than those directly involved with health issues surrendering to its pressure”. He said the proposed EU alcohol policy is “much weaker than the first draft and has a much greater focus on education as the answer to solving the problems of alcohol, when the evidence shows that it does not work”. He regretted that measures that could have made a real difference such as a “better regulation of the product and its marketing”, were no longer in the text of the Communication.

Eurocare, the alcohol policy network in the European Union, welcomed the Strategy and said that it would continue to support DG SANCO in its efforts to reduce the harm done by alcohol in Europe. However, it added “We are sad to see that despite the efforts of the European Health Community and DG SANCO to protect the health and wellbeing of European citizens, in the end, the alcohol industry and other parts of the commission have ensured that the strategy reflects the undue influence of the alcohol industry”. Andrew McNeill, Honorary Secretary of Eurocare said “We regret to see the industry's paw prints are all over the Communication”, and he added “Given that the industry has made it

abundantly clear that it is opposed to the whole idea of a public health strategy on alcohol, how can it possibly be seen as a main collaborator in implementing it?”.

This view appeared to be at least partly shared by EC Health Commissioner Markos Kyprianou. He rejected the charge that the Strategy had been watered down. “The communication came out the way it was intended to,” he said, though he admitted that he had been “surprised at the aggressiveness of the lobbying campaign by certain parts of the alcohol industry”. The only effect of the lobbying, he said, would be “to create doubts as to their willingness to co-operate”.

The Strategy The Communication (strategy) addresses the adverse health effects of harmful and hazardous alcohol consumption in Europe, which is estimated to cause the deaths of 195,000 people a year in the EU. The priorities identified in the Communication are: to protect young people and children; reduce injuries and deaths from alcohol related road accidents; prevent harm among adults and reduce the negative impact on the economy; raise awareness of the impact on health of harmful alcohol consumption; and help gather reliable statistics. The Commission has identified areas where the EU can support the actions of Member States to reduce alcohol related harm, such as financing projects through the Public Health and Research Programmes, exchanging good practice on issues such as curbing under-age drinking, exploring cooperation on information campaigns or tackling drink-driving and other Community initiatives. The Communication also maps out actions which Member States are taking, with a view to promoting good practice, proposes an Alcohol and Health Forum of interested parties and sets out areas where industry can make a contribution, notably in the area of responsible advertising and marketing. Acknowledging the role of Member States in this policy area the Commission does not intend to propose legislation at European level.

European Health and Consumer Protection Commissioner Markos Kyprianou said: “Binge drinking, under-age drinking and drink driving are real public health issues in Europe, especially among young people. The Commission is not targeting moderate alcohol consumption, but seeks to actively support Member States measures to reduce the harm caused by alcohol abuse. This Communication aims to promote discussion and cooperation at European level more actively by creating for a to exchange good practices. I also believe that industry can do more to reduce alcohol harm, promote responsible drinking and improve consumer information. The Commission is committed to supporting this process by bringing the relevant actors together, promoting cooperation and funding projects in this area.”

A major health and economic impact

Fifty-five million adults are estimated to drink to hazardous levels in the EU. Harmful and hazardous alcohol consumption is a net cause of 7.4 % of all ill-health and early death in the EU. Absenteeism due to hazardous alcohol use, drinking during working hours, or working with a ‘hangover’ all have a negative impact on work performance, and thereby on competitiveness and productivity. In the age group of 15–29 years over 10%

of female mortality and around 25% of male mortality are due to hazardous alcohol consumption.

This is also the cause in 16% of cases of child abuse and neglect. Exposure to alcohol during pregnancy can impair brain development and is associated with intellectual deficits. Approximately one accident in four can be attributed to alcohol consumption, and about 10,000 people are killed in alcohol-related road accidents in the EU each year.

Commission action

In cooperation with Member States and stakeholders, the Commission will develop strategies aimed at curbing under-age drinking, by exchanging good practice on issues like selling and serving, marketing, and the image of alcohol use conveyed through the media. Through its Public Health Programme, the Commission will support projects that will contribute to reduce alcohol-related harm in the EU, and especially the harm suffered by children and young people, as well as gathering and disseminating data. It will support the monitoring of young people's drinking habits, with a focus on the increased drinking of alcohol among girls and binge-drinking.

The Commission will explore, in cooperation with Member States and stakeholders, the usefulness of developing efficient common approaches throughout the Community to provide adequate consumer information. Such reflections are particularly important as some Member States are planning to introduce warning labels (e.g. on alcohol and pregnancy). It will support Member States and stakeholders in their efforts to develop information and education programmes on the effect of harmful drinking. Through the EU Research Framework Programme, the Commission will launch research on young people's drinking habits in order to analyse current trends and motivations for drinking, as well as the wider determinants of youth drinking.

Mapping out national action with a view to promoting good practice

Member States have the main responsibility for national alcohol policy. The Commission's role is to encourage cooperation and coordination between Member States, and to complement their activities, for example through the funding of projects. The Communication maps out measures adopted by Member States to tackle alcohol related harm, which can facilitate the dissemination of good practice across the EU. Examples of national measures identified in the Communication include: action to improve consumer information at point of sale, on products or at the workplace; action to better enforce age limits for selling and serving alcohol; education of young people and parents; introducing a lower or zero blood alcohol concentration limit for young or inexperienced drivers, and for professional drivers; and enforcing counter-measures against drink-driving.

Follow-up and consistency with other policies

The Commission will also set up:

an 'Alcohol and Health Forum' by June 2007, to support, provide input and monitor the implementation of the strategy outlined in the Communication. The Forum will focus on topics such as research, information and data collection, and education.

The Commission will also improve coordination between drink-driving and road safety actions including those supported by the Public Health Programme and the Action Plan on Road Safety, to help reduce alcohol-related road accidents, and with a particular view to combating drink-driving. This will, in particular, address the issue of novice and young drivers.

The Commission services will work with stakeholders to create sustained momentum for cooperation on responsible commercial communication and sales. The main aim will be to support EU and national/local Government actions to prevent irresponsible marketing of alcoholic beverages, and examine data about trends in advertising. One aim will be to reach agreement with stakeholders on codes of commercial communication implemented at national and EU level.

The Commission considers that its main contribution to the Strategy should be based on the existing approach of complementing national strategies in this area and therefore does not intend to implement the Strategy through specific new legislative proposals.

The Commission will report regularly on the implementation of measures to tackle harmful and hazardous alcohol consumption, as well as on the impact of the EU Strategy set out in this Communication, based on regular reporting from Member States.