

## **Statement to the WHO from the Meeting of NGOs from the Asia-Pacific Region on Alcohol Policy, Auckland, 9-12.12.05**

Twenty nine representatives from seventeen countries attended the NGO meeting in New Zealand to discuss alcohol policy for the Asia-Pacific region.

At the consultation Dag Rekve of WHO presented the background and the content of the resolution passed by the Fifty-eighth World Health Assembly in May 2005 (WHA58.26 Public Health Problems Caused by Harmful Use of Alcohol).

Dr. Xiandong Wang from WPRO informed the meeting that a Regional Strategy was being developed and consultation on a draft will be undertaken at a technical meeting in Manila in March 2006. It is anticipated the strategy will be on the agenda for the WPRO Regional Committee meeting in September 2006. It is intended to be used as a framework for national policy and an action plan; to be guiding regional and sub-regional collaboration; and to be a tool for advocacy.

In response the representatives of NGOs from the Asia-Pacific region highlighted some important elements:

### **WHA resolution**

The delegates welcomed the WHA resolution and expressed appreciation of the fact that it recognised the role of NGOs in requesting member states to encourage mobilization and active and appropriate engagement of scientific, professional, non governmental and voluntary bodies and civil society in reducing harmful use of alcohol and that the resolution requests the Director-General to collaborate with non governmental organizations to promote the implementation of effective policies and programmes to reduce harmful alcohol consumption. We note the inclusion of the industry sector in the resolution. We acknowledge they have a limited role in the implementation of policy but reaffirm our belief that it is inappropriate for them to be engaged in the development of alcohol policy.

Concern was also raised over the request to the Director-General “to organize open consultations with representatives of industry and agriculture and trade sectors of alcoholic beverages in order to limit the health impact of harmful alcohol consumption”. We request WHO to ensure that the nature of the open consultation does not imply partnership nor does the communication between the industry and WHO have the character of negotiations.

We recall the statement made in the European Ministerial Conference, Stockholm, 2001, in which it is stated that public health policies concerning alcohol need to be formulated by public health interests, without interference from commercial interests.

### **Alcohol situation in the countries represented**

Despite the diversity of the cultures represented there was a commonality in the adverse consequences that the countries are experiencing from the rapidly expanding availability, affordability and marketing of alcohol.

In many of the low to middle income countries represented there is a lack of local research and statistical data that makes advocating for the implementation of evidence based policies difficult.

### **Alcohol policy**

The lack of implementation of evidence based effective policies and in some areas the absence of policies was noted. It was considered that the active role of the alcohol industry in promoting industry-friendly, ineffective policies, government acquiescence in this, and a lack of critical media comment were major contributors in the countries represented in the meeting.

A strong evidence base is available to indicate which policy measures are effective and which are not, as presented in the comprehensive WHO-sponsored study by Babor et. al.: Alcohol – No ordinary commodity. However, we are pleased that the resolution requires the Director-General to report to the Sixtieth World Health Assembly on evidence based strategies and interventions to reduce alcohol related harm and we look forward to new evidence particularly pertaining to implementation of effective policies in low and middle income countries in the Asia-Pacific region.

### **Role of NGOs**

In many countries there is a lack of adequate resources for NGOs to play an important role in alerting decision makers and civil society about the harm from alcohol use.

Despite the meagre resources available to NGOs the meeting heard many examples of the good work done by NGOs in relation to reducing alcohol related harm.

### **An Asia-Pacific Alcohol Policy Alliance**

We have witnessed the increased globalisation and consolidation of the alcohol industry, in the context of economic liberalisation and free trade. We are concerned that this has increased the relative power of the industry and especially its ability to market its product and promote industry friendly policies.

The meeting recognised the need for a regional network of NGOs. This will engage with member states of WHO and regional and international bodies. It will promote effective evidence-based policies to counter the marketing strategies of industry and its encouragement of ineffective policies. It will support and strengthen the work of NGOs throughout the region.

We express our appreciation to the WHO for its co-sponsorship of this meeting. We look forward to further collaboration.