

Statement from the Bangkok Alcohol Policy Conference, 2006

The participants of the Bangkok Alcohol Policy Conference, met in Bangkok on 11th -12th August. They came from organizations with an interest in alcohol issues in 18 countries in the SEARO and WPRO WHO regions. At the meeting the Asia Pacific Alcohol Policy Alliance was launched. This is a network of organizations with the mission of reducing health and social alcohol-related problems by promoting effective evidence-based alcohol policies independent of commercial interests.

The meeting participants discussed the Draft Regional Alcohol Strategy for WPRO and heard a presentation from the SEARO representative on the principles underlying the Discussion Paper on Alcohol Policy Options for SEARO. They acknowledged the importance of Regional Alcohol Strategy development in both Regions and felt that many aspects of the WPRO Strategy and the SEARO Discussion Paper clearly reflected evidence-based public health policies. The WHO secretariat members were congratulated on this work.

The participants acknowledged the consultation process which had been undertaken in the development of the WPRO Draft Alcohol Strategy, including a technical consultation, and opportunities for member states and NGO comment. They requested SEARO to undertake a similar process in the development of a Regional Strategy for the SEAR.

Role of the Alcohol Industry

Participants discussed the potential role of the alcohol industry as it might be represented in any Discussion Paper, Regional Strategy or future WHO Resolution. The participants in the meeting felt that

involvement of these commercial interests in the formulation of alcohol policies is contra indicated. This was based on many experiences at national and regional level in which involvement of the industry in policy formulation had led to emphasis on ineffective policies and failure to agree on inclusion of effective policies.

The meeting proposed that an appropriate formulation regarding the role of the industry for the Strategies and Resolutions (and to guide the WHO approach more generally) would be:

- Given the conflict of interest between the industry's commercial responsibilities to shareholders and those of ensuring public health, involvement of the commercial industry is not appropriate in the development of public policy on alcohol.
- Any mention of private sector interests as potential stakeholders in the development of alcohol policy should clearly exclude any private sector interests with a potential conflict of interest with public health (such as those involved in the production, distribution, and marketing of alcohol).

Economic Treaties and Agreements

Participants discussed experiences in the region in which economic agreements and treaties had dramatically increased availability of imported commercial alcohol with increased marketing and decreased price. This had contributed to the very fast increases in consumption, particularly among young people, and an increase in alcohol-related harm. Participants therefore wished to see clear reference to the need for regional co-operation in order to exclude all alcohol goods and services from economic agreements and

treaties. Where alcohol has already been included in trade agreements and treaties governments may be urged to use alcohol excise taxes to compensate for reduced import tariffs and to specify public health objectives clearly in order to protect controls on marketing and distribution which may otherwise be challenged under the conditions of the economic agreements and treaties.

The WPRO Strategy was acknowledged for its inclusion of mention of economic treaties (4.3.3). However, participants felt that these statements did not reflect strongly enough the importance of the issue for the region. It was noted that the exclusion of alcohol from an economic agreement in the region (PICTA) was strongly supported by the NGO community in the region and that the strategy should reflect this as an appropriate measure.

It was felt that it was essential to stress that economic treaties and agreements should not lead to increased alcohol related harm by diluting existing control policies or preventing the implementation of new evidence based policies. This can be achieved by not treating alcohol as an ordinary commodity.