

Challenges facing us: Dealing with diversity in issues concerning alcohol

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1. The multiple nature and use values of alcohol:

A mixture of physical properties and cultural ascription

- Use can be for any of many purposes:
 - An intoxicant
 - A depressant
 - A poison
 - An addictive substance
 - A food
 - A medium of sociability
 - A sacrament
- But whatever the purpose, other properties are carried along as well
- So alcohol does not fit neatly under any general rubric of market control – whether as a food, as a medicine, as a poison,...
- Alcohol is *sui generis*, and laws and regulations concerning its marketing, promotion, labeling, availability, etc., also need to be *sui generis*.

2. The diverse and multiple harms from alcohol

- Chronic health damage (NCDs)
- Infectious diseases
- Mental disorders
- Work, family role problems
- Harms to specific others
 - assault/injury
 - tangible harm and costs
 - amenity/quality of life
- Harm to society and social groups
- Reaching across multiple handling systems and professions
 - Hospitals
 - Ambulance and emergency departments
 - Police
 - Welfare services
 - Child protection
 - Disability services

3. The many Europes of alcohol

- North and east vs. South
 - The lower association of alcohol with violence and disruption in wine cultures
 - Middle-aged male heavy drinking in the east
- Disruptive youth drinking in Anglo-Celtic Europe (and elsewhere)
- The new wave of abstinence (Moslem rather than radical Protestant or women in southern Italy)
- Big cultural and structural changes
 - The waves of movement from country to city
 - The change in women's relation to drinking
 - The succession of generations: wet and dry

Diversity in the problems, increased uniformity in the response: the central vs. the local

- The problems are often private, the pieces are picked up locally
- Reflecting this, Temperance interests everywhere had a strong interest in "local option"
- Market interests have a strong interest in centralised control
 - Uniform market conditions
 - The centre is further from the coalface of problems, often collects the main taxes, is more amenable to industry interests
- The Single Market rules and jurisprudence as an instrument to override diversity
 - Particularly for alcohol (vs., for instance, tobacco) it has been an instrument to undercut public health interests

The trick of statist "devolution": responsibility but no power

- An emphasis on giving the responsibility back to local authorities sounds good, plays well
- But often the power and the resources are retained centrally
- The crucial question (e.g., in the UK): does the local authority have power to act, or are its hands tied by central "guidance" as enforced by court decisions?

The ratchet mechanism in alcohol control: movement only in one direction

- Strict control regimes a legacy of a time of huge popular movements
- Weakened by the combined pressures of EU single market rules, market interests, the ideology of consumer sovereignty
- Difficult to take away market licenses once granted
 - So an expensive lawyer is worth it to get one
- “Why can’t they be like us?” -- the cultural incomprehension concerning alcohol between southern and northern Europe

The need both to recognise and respond to diversity, and to set and reach goals

- At the more local level, there is the challenge of learning from the experience elsewhere while responding to the local mix of alcohol problems
- As a continent, Europe has big problems with alcohol; living with them every day is no reason to be blasé about them
- The EU and WHO-Euro need to set concrete and realistic goals to reduce alcohol-related harms, and to identify and implement indicators of the extent of progress towards the goals
 - Current example: the WHO process to agree on indicators and set goals for reducing rates of NCDs both globally and nationally
- Good intentions are not enough; progress towards the goals is what counts