Opinion of the Committee of the Regions on an EU strategy to support Member States in reducing alcohol-related harm

(2007/C 197/08)

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

— welcomes the fact that the Commission has no intention of substituting Community action for national policies, which have already been put in place in most of the Member States, or to propose the development of harmonised legislation in the field of preventing alcohol-related harm; shares the Commission's view that the national policies which have already been put in place in most of the Member States relate to national competences in accordance with Article 152 of the EC Treaty and the subsidiarity principle;

— would point out that in executing its plan to map out actions which have already been put in place by Member States and to identify best practices, and in particular to identify areas which it feels offer scope for further progress, the Commission must not go beyond the objectives and competences assigned to it under the Treaties;

— shares the Commission's view that, in the field of health policy, Article 152 of the EC Treaty provides for a clear division of tasks between the European Union and the Member States, with EU action confined to complementing national policies;

— disagrees with the Commission's view that there is a need for a common definition of the term 'binge-drinking' to prevent and cut back heavy and extreme drinking patterns;

— strongly doubts the benefit to be gained by the Commission's proposal to analyse differences in drinking patterns by country, age and gender. The same applies to the proposed system for flexible but standardised definitions for alcohol data and the conducting of repeated and comparative surveys on alcohol consumption, which, in view of the diversity of cultural habits related to alcohol consumption which the Commission itself acknowledges, is very unlikely to provide much in the way of new information.
I. Policy recommendations

Communication from the Commission to the Council, the European Parliament, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions — An EU strategy to support Member States in reducing alcohol-related harm

COM(2006) 625 final

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

On the communication from the Commission

1. would point out that the health risks of harmful and hazardous alcohol consumption have long been the subject of social and political debate. In this context, it is understandable that the European Commission has chosen to tackle this subject and to place particular emphasis on preventing and cutting back heavy and extreme drinking patterns, as well as under-age drinking, alcohol-related road accidents and Foetal Alcohol Syndrome;

2. in view of the different cultural habits related to alcohol consumption in the various Member States, considers it important that the communication focuses not on drinking itself, but on alcohol misuse and its harmful consequences;

3. also welcomes the fact that the Commission has no intention of substituting Community action for national policies, which have already been put in place in most of the Member States, or to propose the development of harmonised legislation in the field of preventing alcohol-related harm; shares the Commission’s view that the national policies which have already been put in place in most of the Member States relate to national competences in accordance with Article 152 of the EC Treaty and the subsidiarity principle;

4. in this context, would point out that in executing its plan to map out actions which have already been put in place by Member States and to identify best practices, and in particular to identify areas which it feels offer scope for further progress, the Commission must not go beyond the objectives and competences assigned to it under the Treaties;

5. is pleased that when discussing measures to support and complement national policies implemented by Member States, the Commission takes explicit account of the fact that drinking patterns and cultures vary widely across the EU;

On the mandate for action

6. shares the Commission’s view that, in the field of health policy, Article 152 of the EC Treaty provides for a clear division of tasks between the European Union and the Member States, with EU action confined to complementing national policies;

7. shares the Commission’s view that many Member States already have extensive policies in place to address the adverse health effects related to harmful and hazardous alcohol consumption, and that most Member States have already taken steps to reduce alcohol-related harm:

8. takes note of the Commission’s strategy to support Member States in reducing alcohol-related harm but does not, for reasons of subsidiarity, and also in view of the different cultural habits related to alcohol consumption acknowledged by the Commission in its Communication agree that potentially similar problems in different Member States necessarily require an EU-wide approach to resolve them;

On the case for action

9. shares the Commission’s view that harmful and hazardous alcohol consumption has a major impact on public health and thus also generates costs related to health care, health insurance, law enforcement and public order, and workplaces, and thus has a negative impact on economic development and on society as a whole. Young people are particularly at risk. In view of this, there is a real need for policies aimed at the prevention and treatment of harmful alcohol consumption;

On the priority themes and good practices

10. agrees with the Commission that harmful alcohol consumption among young people in particular has a negative impact not only on health and social wellbeing, but also on educational attainment and involvement in the social and democratic life of the community to which they belong; also notes increasing trends in under-age ‘binge-drinking’ in many Member States. It is particularly important in the Member States, therefore, also to discuss public policy measures designed to curb under-age drinking and harmful drinking patterns among youth, bearing in mind that any legislative measures must be considered and prepared with particular care in the Member States so as not to make it more difficult to reach the people concerned because of the repressive nature of the measures involved;

11. shares the Commission’s view that effective enforcement of national and regional drink-driving countermeasures could substantially reduce traffic deaths, injuries and disability;

12. recommends that, by developing a common evidence base at EU level as envisaged in the communication, the Commission take steps to assess the impact of moderate alcohol consumption and arrive at a common definition of ‘harmful and hazardous consumption’;

13. disagrees with the Commission’s view that there is a need for a common definition of the term ‘binge-drinking’ to prevent and cut back heavy and extreme drinking patterns;
14. would welcome a research initiative to estimate the cost and benefits of policy options as this would also help assess the impact of various campaigns designed to prevent alcohol-related harm;

15. strongly doubts the benefit to be gained by the Commission’s proposal to analyse differences in drinking patterns by country, age and gender. The same applies to the proposed system for flexible but standardised definitions for alcohol data and the conducting of repeated and comparative surveys on alcohol consumption, which, in view of the diversity of cultural habits related to alcohol consumption which the Commission itself acknowledges, is very unlikely to provide much in the way of new information;

16. apart from this, would strongly emphasise that implementing the EU strategy to support Member States in reducing alcohol-related harm must not impose a financial burden on regional and local authorities;

On levels of action

17. in view of the Member States’ full competence, in this area which the Commission clearly acknowledges, welcomes the Commission’s approach to initiating and supporting measures on three different levels of action to address the adverse health effects related to harmful and hazardous alcohol consumption;

18. in principle welcomes moves to support — in particular in cooperation with the Member States — strategies aimed at curbing under-age drinking, and recommends that the Commission’s plans to set up an Alcohol and Health Forum be implemented as an integral part of the EU Platform for Action on Diet, Physical Activity and Health in order to ensure a cohesive approach and, at the same time, help cut back on red tape and the proliferation of official bodies, as advocated by the Commission on numerous occasions. EU-level work on alcohol and health should focus on sharing knowledge and exchanging best practice on the basis of the measures already in place at national, regional and local levels;

19. welcomes the Commission’s idea of examining how research at the European level can bring value to an EU strategy to support Member States to reduce alcohol related harm, as part of the 7th Research Framework Programme;

20. is very pleased that the Commission communication addresses and takes due account of national measures and approaches to reducing alcohol abuse; with this in mind, agrees with the Commission that specific measures adopted by Member States to reduce alcohol-related harm with a view to protecting public health, are based on their particular cultural contexts;

21. strongly agrees with the Commission that national strategies could be more effective if they were supported by local and community-based activities; with this in mind, welcomes any involvement of regional and local decision-makers in EU activities under Article 152 of the EC Treaty;

22. agrees with the Commission that local communities could contribute to preventive and supportive strategies to protect citizens from alcohol-related harm, but would emphasise that this is already happening in many places and therefore takes note of the Commission’s strategy to support local and regional authorities;

23. with regard to coordination of actions at EU level, would refer to Article 152 of the EC Treaty, which definitively establishes a clear division of tasks between the European Union and the Member States, with EU action confined to complementing national policies; the Commission’s efforts to make policy decisions more consistent must not result in infringements of this clear separation of powers; is therefore opposed to the introduction of harmonised warning labels, which the Commission contemplates in its communication; at the same time, is firmly in favour of self-regulatory approaches in the advertising industry;

On the conclusions

24. agrees that the Commission’s main contribution to alcohol policies should be to complement national policies and strategies in this field. Indeed, this is the role envisaged by Article 152 of the EC Treaty; is very pleased that, in view of the clear division of powers between the EU and Member States, the Commission is not planning to submit any new legislative proposals;

25. also welcomes the fact that in, implementing the strategy, the Commission is placing particular emphasis on the principles of subsidiarity and better regulation.

Brussels, 6 June 2007.

The President
of the Committee of the Regions

Michel DELEBARRE
## II. Procedure

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<td>Rapporteur</td>
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