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ALLCOOL - Raising awareness and action-research on Heavy Episodic Drinking among low income youth and young adults in Southern Europe

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European Policy Recommendations

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Short background:

The project:

ALLCOOL is a project where a consortium of research and collaborating stakeholders in 3 South European countries (Portugal, Spain and Italy) aim to tackle the growing trend of Heavy Episodic Drinking (HED) in the region. More research is needed to analyse the relationship between HED and lower socio-economic youth and young adults (15-30 years old).

This is particularly relevant in Southern European countries going through a socioeconomic crisis, with increasing unemployment rates especially among recently graduated students and decreasing family income.

By promoting healthy lifestyles, filling research gaps and implementing innovative and replicable local interventions focusing on prevention of heavy episodic drinking among youth this project will: 1) promote good health among EU youth population; 2) in the long-term, contribute to the sustainability of the health systems and healthy work forces.

This document integrates European Policy Recommendations of the 3 countries of the Allcool Consortium. European recommendations were informed by contributions from research component, consultative forums/ work groups and inputs from the pilot intervention as well as the National Policy Recommendations produced by the three countries.

European Policy recommendations addressing Heavy Episodic Drinking

The following document is a result of the work developed in the ambit of the ALLCOOL project and it contains policy recommendations at the European level addressing Heavy Episodic Drinking (HED) – an emerging alcohol use pattern in southern European countries that lacks interventions in terms of Prevention and Harm Reduction. The recommendations are based on the results of the multi method research carried out by the project, as well as of the pilot-interventions implemented in Porto (Portugal), Bologna (Italy) and Tarragona (Spain).

Introduction:

Alcohol is one of the world's top three priority public health areas. The evidence available to support this statement is large, diverse and persuasive. Even though only half the world's population drinks alcohol, it is the world's third leading cause of ill health and premature death, after low birth weight and unsafe sex (for which alcohol is a risk factor), and greater than tobacco (WHO, 2012).

Heavy Episodic Drinking (HED) is a concept colloquially used to define the use of a significant amount of alcohol¹ during a single occasion or time period², and was usually associated with northern and eastern European countries. However, the globalisation processes increased the commercialisation of different beverages from other countries and continents and the migration of different alcohol use trends (Devaux et Sassi, 2015). We can observe that youngsters from southern European countries (namely Portugal, Italy and Spain) are nowadays using other beverages, like spirits and beer and, in addition, the spaces and periods of use have also been changing and tend to occur during the weekend, deeply associated with nightlife venues (pubs, discos, parties, festivals, public spaces, etc.) [Solei-Vila et al., 2014].

¹ According to the Portuguese Directorate-General of Health, a standard beverage unit comprehends 10 grams of pure alcohol. The amount of pure alcohol in each drink can be calculated through a formula that takes into account the alcohol content of said beverage (alcohol percentage) and the volume of the glass/container. The HED amount changes according to gender: 4 beverages concerning women and 5 in what concerns men.

² For a thorough definition of HED and the content values of the beverages, please check Spora, 2017.

According to WHO (2012) each Member State should consider the nature of the alcohol-related problems it faces and determine which possible actions would prove to be most applicable and effective in its own circumstances. Because there is no single model that can be applied across the European Region, the research that supports the recommendations aimed to characterise HED, specifically in the cities of Porto, Bologna and Tarragona, to better conceive adequate solutions to diminish alcohol related harms. The research design was multi-method, integrated both quantitative and qualitative data and included several key social actors in the alcohol use field.³

Data from research carried out by the AllCool Project in Porto, Tarragona and Bologna shows that, among young people that consume alcohol, **51% drink frequently or even daily**. In other words, they drink 2 or more days a week. **HED prevalence in the last 12 months** on the young alcohol drinking population is **73,8%**. **Half of the young people that perform HED do it almost every weekend**. This data shows how extended and habitual this alcohol consumption behavior is between young people that drink alcohol⁴.

Various studies in this field report **several negative consequences** associated with HED, like unprotected sexual relationships, professional or academic failure and interpersonal problems (Townshend et al., 2014; Hibell et al., 2012, WHO, 2014, Viner & Taylor, 2007). In what concerns the **community well-being**, there were also some changes in the local dynamics associated with new nightlife activities: in addition to the “traditional” venues (pubs, discos, etc.), the streets and some neighbourhoods with nightlife venues are now experienced as leisure contexts, what lead to the large-scale occupation of public spaces previously functioning as residential areas. HED in public spaces presents new challenges, compromising the habitability of some neighbourhoods due to the noise level that affects inhabitant’s rest and privacy, the garbage produced, the excessive public urination, the episodes of vandalism and interpersonal violence, the feeling of insecurity, etc.

³ For more information, please consult Spora 2017..

⁴ For more information please consult Spora, 2017.

This situation is further aggravated when nightlife activities become rooted in the urban tissue, leading to the establishment of neighbourhoods dedicated to said activities – “**Party Districts**” (*Rodrigues, 2016*) - and the inhabitant’s rights frequently collide with those of the party goers that occupy the public space.

Recommendations:

Consistent with the work developed throughout the project and the dimensions analysed during the research stage, the recommendations presented below are framed according to two domains: (i) Community interventions; (ii) European policies and regulations

I. Community interventions

1) Support the creation and continuity of community interventions focusing HED, both prevention and harm reduction orientated.

This interventions should consider different dimensions, like leisure, the active search of pleasure and include information about immediate, relational and social consequences of drinking, rather than about long term and health consequences, as the research carried out shows young people worry more about social, relational and short-term consequences, what is known as “moral hangover”. These outreach interventions should be implemented in nightlife venues, since the majority of HED occurrences take place in these settings and should include peer education as the research shows the act of drinking alcohol is socially constructed, revealing the influence of the peer group in this type of behaviour. AllCool’s research shows that peer-to-peer interventions in party settings are well taken by the youngsters and are effective in the promotion of healthier and safer alcohol use patterns. Also, access to follow-up consultations should be provided to youngsters who access the emergency services for alcohol related motives.

2) Implementation and enforcement of policies to promote adequate training to nightlife workers.

People who work at nightlife venues and alcohol dispensaries should be adequately trained in terms of healthcare and safety, as well as in other relevant themes as responsible selling of alcohol, first aid and CPR, management of conflicts, creation of safe environments that promote the responsible use of alcohol, etc.

II. European policies and regulations

1. Creation and implementation of policies that promote responsible alcohol use and harm reduction approaches.

Alcohol use never ceased to exist despite the restrictive methods adopted and the repressive measures have shown many times in history to produce iatrogenic side-effects (e.g. black market, unsafe/dangerous products, myths and disinformation). AllCool's research results show that young people claim that prohibitive and panic spreading messages do not work as intended because of their counterproductive effects. Instead, those addressed to a more responsible alcohol consumption and real-life experiences tend to perform better. The legislation that limits the purchase of alcohol should be followed by supervision and informal educational actions, in order to keep people informed about the potential risks of alcohol use and educate in terms of safer alcohol use patterns i.e. empowerment as a tool of self-management. Prohibitionist and punitive policies, if inevitable, should always appear accompanied by awareness-raising, educational and community measures.

2. Creation and implementation of regulation that favours environmental prevention measures.

AllCool's data reveals that both professionals and youngsters agree interventions should consider structural characteristics of the leisure context to facilitate young people to perform more protective behaviours.

Regulation that ensures easy access to water points in the public space; safer mobility by creating alternatives to driving personal vehicles; a set of public services that minimise the impact and negative pressure associated with nightlife activities in certain areas of the cities, eg public bathrooms open during the evening/night, garbage bins, ashtrays, proper lighting, etc.; strategies/campaigns to decrease the number of glass

containers and public nuisance are examples of environmental prevention strategies that can be used to promote protective behaviours. Considering the identified trend of DIU, there should be more environmental tools to prevent it, namely a wider network of public transportation, with adapted schedules.

3. Creation and implementation of policies that promote dialogue and mediation between the different social actors associated with the occupation of public spaces and the use of alcohol in said context.

AllCool's research related to where young people drink alcohol shows that public spaces are youngster's favourite type of context and leisure space. In fact, 56,1% of the youngsters (18-29years old) in Porto, Tarragona and Bologna has been to these places often or always in the last 12 months. This has an impact on the local dynamics, with complaints from the inhabitants being frequent, and raises new challenges to the cities. Repressive and restrictive regulations that aim to decrease the availability of nightlife activities as a way to eradicate the occupation of public spaces and the use of alcohol in said context must be carefully analyzed and acknowledge the role these activities play as active, dynamic and creative cultural and socializing spaces and times, rather than only a set of risky behaviours, noise level issues and public disturbances. Informal community and educational actions that support the peaceful and conciliatory transition to a sustainable supply of nightlife activities must be taken, promoting the dialogue and mediation between the different social actors associated to nightlife activities and HED and resorting to strategies of positive communication;

4. Create regulation to include *standard drink unit's (SDU)* content on labels.

"As public health professionals search for effective policies to address alcohol-related harm, labels stand out as an underutilized way of empowering consumers to make healthy decisions about alcohol intake" (WHO, 2017). Although currently labels already inform on the alcohol content of the drink, it is highly recommended to include the equivalent Standard Drink Unit on labels. This alcohol unit, clear and illustrative, allows to more easily identify the quantity of alcohol ingested and to make a comparison between the recommended amount. Besides the unit, the label must

include the recommended maximum SDU per day for men and women thus empowering for self-regulation.

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