



## **Conclusions of the conference**

**By NordAN President Gabriel Romanus 12<sup>th</sup> October 2008**

Dear friends, our conference is coming to an end.  
What conclusions can we draw today?

The theme of our conference is "Alcohol, drugs and harm to others".  
Our assembly of representatives last night adopted a resolution on this theme.  
That, of course, is one of our conclusions.  
The following points are my personal conclusions.

The alcohol and drug policy debate should more than in recent years focus on the harm caused by alcohol and narcotics to other persons than the drinker or the drug user.

This does not mean that we should neglect the drinker or the drug addict. I do not subscribe to the attitude that it is OK if people ruin their lives, as long as it does not harm others. Everyone who needs care should get it, also if it means a cost to society – paid by others. Therefore the state has the right to try to prevent also the harm to the drinker's own health. Also, since we are talking about dependence creating substances, the idea that the harm to oneself is inflicted voluntarily is an illusion. Those who are dependent on alcohol or drugs probably did not intend to become addicts.

There is a need for more research and statistics on the harm to others. To stimulate such research and to distribute the results is a task for NordAN, among others.

But we already know enough to ask for and to support an alcohol and drug policy based on restrictions directed at the whole population, since such measures constitute the most efficient prevention. Like it is said in the alcohol action plan of WHO in Europe: We need a balanced alcohol policy, including both population based measures and action directed at risk groups and risky behaviours. And the drug policy should aim at reducing both the supply of and the demand for drugs, and at reducing the harm caused by drugs. Of course, prevention of drug use is the best way to reduce the harm caused by drugs. Therefore, a drug free society should be the long term vision.

The drinks industry and some politicians have the attitude: "Let people drink as much as they want, but if they can not handle it, or if they harm others, then we should act, force them to treatment or punish them hard."

The trouble is, that then it is often too late, the harm is already done. Of course, rehabilitation is never too late, but it is not easy, and we know that reducing the use of alcohol and other drugs is the most efficient way of preventing harm, both to the user and to others.

Our conference has brought to attention the harm caused by alcohol in families, both to the spouse of the drinker and to children who live in a family where someone drinks too much. I do not think that anyone of us will ever forget Marion's story about the elephant in the living room – the elephant being a metaphor for dependence.

But we have also discussed how single episodes of drinking can affect children, if they perceive that their parents are not the same persons that they are used to, when the parents are under the influence of alcohol.

We have covered many other areas during these days. We have been reminded of the importance of Nordic cooperation, Nordic-Baltic cooperation and a wider cooperation in the Northern Dimension area, including Northwest Russia.

We have also been urged to use the opportunity – now in October, but also later – to influence the work against alcohol problems on a global level, by giving our input into the process going on in the World Health Organisation.

Yesterday, we held our formal annual meeting of representatives. We have started a process to make our internal democracy function better, and to prioritize our resources better – a process initiated by our Norwegian friends in Actis. We will come back to this during the coming year.

For 2009, NordAN will have roughly the same executive board as we have had 2008. For the trust that was expressed to the board yesterday, and for the trust expressed by re-electing me as president for one more year, I am deeply grateful.

I see this year's conference as another one in the row of successful NordAN annual meetings. Among other events, I think of the outstanding concert to honour the memory of the victims of alcohol. A lot of work has been done to make our conference a success, by Lauri Beekman and the other local organisers, by Suvi Tella and Ritva Varamäki, and by our secretary general Hasse Schneidermann and our board members. On behalf of all participants, I want to express the warmest thanks to you all.

I wish everyone a safe journey home. Let us go home with the conviction that there is a lot of important work to be done, that we all have both the opportunity and the responsibility to contribute to making our part of the world a better place to live in.

The conference is closed.