

Trends in drinking patterns in the ECAS countries: general remarks

In my presentation I will take a look at trends in drinking patterns in the so called European Comparative Alcohol Study (ECAS) countries. These countries included all 15 EU Member States prior to May 2004 and Norway.

It is a long-established fact that a certain homogenisation of alcohol consumption has taken place in western Europe since World War II (**PP**). Until about 1980, per capita alcohol consumption kept rising in most countries, except in France, where a decline started already in the 1950s. The increase was sharper in countries with originally lower consumption, which led to a partial levelling-off of the differences. The increasing trend came to a halt in about 1980, and more and more wine-drinking countries would join the declining trend first experienced in France. The differences in per capita alcohol consumption have diminished in western Europe in the 1980s and 1990s, too. Furthermore, the share of the traditionally dominant beverage has diminished in all countries, to the extent that there is not one single dominantly spirits-drinking country left in western Europe. And yet, significant differences still remain between the countries, when it comes to beverage preferences in general.

The decreasing differences in alcohol consumption, especially between the wine and beer-drinking countries is also reflected in alcohol-related mortality (**PP**). Especially relevant here is the trends in the number of liver cirrhosis deaths because differences in cirrhosis rates are indicative of differences in the prevalence of chronic abuse or heavy drinking. The cirrhosis trends shown in Figure 2 suggest that not only the differences in per capita alcohol consumption have been reduced over time between the wine-drinking countries and the remaining countries, especially the beer-drinking countries, but also the differences in the prevalence of chronic heavy drinking.

The method used in the ECAS study to estimate the trend in consumption of unrecorded alcohol gave no indication of an increased consumption of unrecorded alcohol in the Mediterranean countries. On the contrary, the results could indicate a slight decrease in those countries. In the northern European countries, however, unrecorded alcohol consumption has increased, from about 1 litre in the 1980s to 2 litres per capita 15+ in the second half of the 1990s. There were also signs of increased unrecorded alcohol in the UK, too, starting from the

mid 1980s. In the remaining countries in Central Europe, the changes in unrecorded alcohol appeared to be modest.

After adjusting the recorded consumption figures for differences in unrecorded consumption the differences in total alcohol consumption between the countries became somewhat reduced. However, despite differences in unrecorded alcohol, the relative position between the countries in their total consumption remains to a large extent unaffected, both in the 1980s and in the 1990s. Thus, the explanation as to why consumption has declined in Southern Europe and why Norway and Sweden, in particular, show a lower per capita consumption than the other countries must be sought elsewhere than by referring to country differences in the volume of unrecorded alcohol.

A summary of trends in drinking patterns by different aspects of drinking

If we first take a look at the *Abstinence and frequencies of drinking* we can notice that, somewhat surprisingly, the share of abstainers does not vary very much between the country groups (**PP**). In the traditionally temperance-minded Nordic countries (the "former spirits countries" Finland, Norway, and Sweden) abstinence rates turned into decline in the 1960s and 1970s. At the same time, the differences in abstinence rates between men and women diminished, but did not disappear. In the Central European beer countries, the data does not allow any long-term analyses, but the figures indicate a lower prevalence of abstinence than in the Nordic countries. The few results from Mediterranean wine-drinking countries indicate that abstinence rates among women have been as high or higher than in the Nordic countries.

At the other end of the scale, the proportion of daily drinkers has always been lowest in the former beer countries and highest in the wine countries (**PP**). Again, the changes and homogenisation of abstinence and frequencies of drinking appear very slow.

We made also a six country drinking habit survey in the ECAS project. This was made in 2000 and countries included were Finland and Sweden representing the "former spirits drinking countries", UK and Germany representing beer countries and France and Italy that represented the wine countries. According to this survey, the frequency of drinking increases with age in France and Italy in particular, but also in Germany, and most likely in Sweden and among Finnish men. This seems not to be the case in the UK, where the results suggest that the youngest drink as often or even more often than their elders.

Gender and age. A much-disputed issue is the possible increase in women's share of alcohol consumption, as a consequence of a multitude of changes in women's social position, cultural patterns and living conditions. Women's share of total alcohol consumption is the crudest indicator available. Today, women's share of drinking in most EU member countries amounts to about 30 percent of all alcohol consumption. The figure varies between 25 and 35 percent.. The scattered data from earlier decades (PP) shows, however, that the trends may have been different in different groups of countries.

Except for the Nordic countries, the Netherlands and the UK, there is fairly little information on the possible trends in women's share of the consumption over time. The decline of temperance among women in the former spirits countries in Northern Europe led to a significant increase of women's share in the 1960s and 1970s. In the Netherlands, a similar turn occurred a bit earlier. Otherwise, it is difficult to say whether an increase of women's drinking can have been an all-European phenomenon in the post-war years. Of the wine countries, only Italy provides long-term data, with evidence that the share of women has been growing gradually. As this has taken place at a time of decreasing alcohol consumption, the net result may still have been a decline in absolute levels of women's drinking in Italy.

Long-term changes in the age distribution can be covered only partially. Contrary to the stereotypical views of heavily drinking adolescents, in most countries the peak of consumption occurs in the age groups between 30 and 50 years. The heaviest drinking groups are most typically males in their thirties and forties. However, the age distribution differ between on the one hand the northern European countries and the UK, and on the other and central and southern European countries. It also seems that in the Nordic countries as well as in UK young adults reports the highest consumption. When we move from North towards the Mediterranean we can notice that those reporting the highest consumption grow older. For instance in France, Italy and Germany, the consumption increases from the youngest group to the middle age group and the the oldest age group (50-64) also shows a higher mean consumption than the youngest.

Occasions of heavy intake ("binge drinking"). "Binge drinking", or the share and number of occasions of heavy intake, is an acute topic in international debate on the prevention of alcohol problems. It is often suggested that differences between countries in problem rates may rise from differences in drinking patterns, and in the prevalence of "binge drinking" in particular.

Very little can, however, be said about long-term trends in the prevalence of binge drinking. The few existing longer series of national studies suggest that the share of occasions of binge drinking may change only very slowly. Qualitative features of drinking, such as binge drinking, can therefore be typically very resistant against change, despite changes in living conditions, the economy and even alcohol policies.

The ECAS survey sheds some light on differences today between the six EU countries. In line with the average quantity per drinking occasion, also the number of heavy drinking occasions, and the proportion of heavy drinking occasions to all drinking occasions, show a north-south gradient, with the highest intoxication-oriented drinking in north and the lowest in south.

Drinking contexts: time, place, company and the nature of the occasion. What empirical data we have on drinking patterns provides little systematic information on long-term changes in drinking contexts. The timing of drinking over the week has in all countries been influenced by the introduction of a five-day weekly working schedule. Drinking seems to be more concentrated in the weekends in Central and Northern Europe than in the Mediterranean countries.

Drinking alcoholic beverages at lunch has been the most common in the Mediterranean wine countries and least common in the Nordic countries. Drinking at restaurants/bars and at home but not in connection with meals is the most common in the UK. Also drinking at restaurants/bars is the least common in the Nordic countries, whereas drinking at home, but not in connection with meals, is the least common in Southern Europe.

According to the ECAS survey for instance drinking occasions in connection with lunches and dinners in France and Italy contribute to 75% and 82% respectively of all drinking occasions related to these four drinking contexts. In Germany, Sweden and the UK, lunch and dinner drinking occasions amounts to roughly 50%, and in Finland to no more than one third

with especially low proportions for lunch drinking in all four. Finland shows by far the higher proportion of drinking occasions at home but not in relation to a meal. These country differences hold true for both men and women.

Also, very little is known about drinking at contexts that are assumed to be risky in other ways. It is often assumed that homes (and meals at home in particular) would be contexts of low risk, whereas public premises and other public places would be a context of elevated risk of alcohol-related harm. There is, however, variation between countries and between different points of time.

Concluding remarks

As a conclusion we can say that many qualitative features of drinking patterns change all the time, but they do so very slowly. The reason may be that cultural patterns of drinking are so deeply rooted and multi-layered that any changes necessarily take much time.

In our 50-year-perspective there are some, mostly weak signs of homogenisation in drinking patterns between the European countries. It is possible that the significant quantitative changes and even homogenisation in alcohol consumption have parallel traces on the more qualitative aspects of drinking, but these traces emerge very slowly, in generations rather than in decades.

It is important to consider whether factors and processes that are not alcohol-specific but underlie changes in drinking patterns (urbanisation, modernisation, economic development, internationalisation) may have been different in different countries, when it comes to changes in qualitative features of drinking patterns. Still, the result may be an increasing homogenisation. A behavioural pattern that is considered traditional and declining in one country (e.g. wine drinking at family meals in the Mediterranean countries) may be modern and increasing in other countries (e.g. wine drinking at family meals in the Nordic countries).

The persistence of qualitative features of drinking patterns should be related to short-term and long-term changes in alcohol consumption. Short-term changes typically result from price fluctuations or significant reforms of alcohol policy. Long-term changes include the effects of changes in living conditions. Very long-term changes have been suggested to appear as "long waves" of alcohol consumption, with a wavelength of 60 to 80 years. In typical short-term

considerations of shaping policy measures to prevent alcohol problems, all these different time frames operate in parallel. Therefore there is always a risk that cultural friction against changes in drinking patterns may easily be overlooked, and similarly, prospects for positive results from influencing drinking patterns exaggerated.

Thank you!