

Welcome speech by Eberhard Schatz

Dear all,

It is a great pleasure to welcome you here in beautiful Ljubljana at the final conference of the current project period of the Correlation Network. We are very proud to present to you all the results, experiences and materials, which we developed with so many partners all over Europe in the last 3 years. But we don't intend to organise a self-promoting event here. Instead we aim to broaden the views for all of us, to learn from other experiences, to look across the borders of countries, of professional backgrounds and settings.

Looking at the program, I think we have achieved that goal: the program reflects the diversity of issues, problems and solutions we have to deal with in our daily work, either as policy maker or as service provider or activist.

Today we will discuss the challenges for good policy making and the impact of Europe on this process. As an EC funded project and raising the voice at the European level, we should be involved in the discussion of the benefits and limitations of European policies on health matters and collaboration. The voice of civil society should play an important role on that level, too. And that is not always easy, and needs time and patience, as experiences show.

Tomorrow we will have major topics as HIV/AIDS and hepatitis C on the agenda. In both major sessions we will be presenting results and recommendations of Correlation working groups as well, followed by skill building workshops on outreach, peer work, eHealth and Hepatitis C training, organised by the coordinators of the 4 Correlation working groups. The afternoon is devoted to abstract driven sessions, highlighting a lot of different aspects of our work. A special thanks to all colleagues from other European projects and networks, contributing to the program with their experiences and insights.

Parallel to our program, the University Medical Centre of Ljubljana organizes a satellite session on Hepatitis for Slovenian participants tomorrow afternoon.

On Wednesday, we will have a sex work dialogue session and we are very happy to have representatives of sex workers with us, knowing, that this issue is underrepresented not only within our network but also on European level.

Last but not least, we have a very exciting policy session at the end of the conference. As you may know, a distinguished panel of (ex) politicians just recently issued a paper, arguing for a major shift in world wide drug policy through decriminalizing and regulating of drug use. We are happy to contribute to this discussion with a panel of experienced stakeholders here.

Looking at you, the participants of this conference, I can state that we have already achieved another important goal: to bring together the entire range of stakeholders, concerned with improving policy and practice regarding vulnerable groups and people: Service providers, researchers, policy makers, networks, grass root organizations and service providers from 37 countries all over the European region. Again - we are happy to have drug user activists, sex workers and service users with us, as their slogan: 'nothing about us with out us' is now more important than ever.

Furthermore we are very delighted to welcome so many people from the South Eastern European region. It was one of the reasons to choose Ljubljana as location for the conference – in the heart of Europe, between the old and new member states of the Union – in order to improve networking and collaboration with this upcoming region.

This reminds me to thank a couple of institutions, who supported the organization of this event: First of all the European Commission and the Dutch Ministry of Health for their support of the project as such. The Global Fund for providing a couple of scholarships, MSD for their support of the Slovenian satellite, the Open Society Institute for their support of the policy reform session and last not least we are very grateful for the support of the city of Ljubljana, who is hosting a reception tomorrow for the participants of the conference and to the Ministry of Health of Slovenia for their logistical support and for hosting a dinner tonight at the Ljubljana castle.

And of course, let me thank all the hundreds of people who collaborated with us in the last couple of years. Without their commitment and input all this never would have happened anyway.

I hope that we will have an interesting, enjoyable and stimulating event here in Ljubljana.

There is one more organisation, we have to thank for their engagement and support: and that is the host organisation of our project: the Regenboog Groep in Amsterdam.

Please let me introduce to you the general director of the FRG, Hans Wijnands.